

Chapter 1

Harry Potter was coming to Hogwarts. He was coming soon: only a few pages away by the self-updating potions calendar on the wall of Severus Snape's laboratory.

Snape would have the rest of July, when he would brew Poppy's list for the infirmary. He would have August, his last blessed month of freedom to finish his private projects before the arrival of the dunderheads. Then the latest scion of that rotten stock would be swaggering through the halls of what had been to Snape both haven and prison for so many quiet years.

He glared at the calendar, resenting it. With nightmare clarity he pictured James Potter, snitch in hand, lording it over a new generation, smirking at him from the back row of the student desks, waiting for the chance to humiliate him once more. Living through the misery of his student years had been bad enough: now he would have to relive them, day by miserable day. It had been seven years of hell. He had raised the possibility of a sabbatical with Albus, and had been refused with a smile and a dozen good reasons.

Restless, he shut down the current potion, and put it in stasis. He was too distracted to work well at the moment. Harry Potter was coming to Hogwarts, and Snape might as well try to command the tides as prevent the imminent catastrophe.

Everyone else was astir with excitement. Whispers about The Boy-Who-Lived rustled through the halls. Not just his colleagues, either: even the ghosts gossiped discreetly. The very portraits were uncommonly active, awaiting the young hero.

Climbing a staircase and stalking quickly down a hall, Snape scowled at the worst offenders, a gaggle of shrill voiced witches forever celebrating Beltane. One of them, the sultry, buxom one with flaming tresses, always made eyes at him when he passed. Today she blew him a sympathetic kiss. He did not respond, and felt like lashing out as they commented on his weakness for red hair.

Minerva was working on the Hogwarts letters today. She had said as much at breakfast. Like himself, she did not spend the whole of the summer at the school, but was back and forth as her duties demanded. Not like Sprout, engrossed in her gardens for the entire time. No, Minerva had just returned for the letters.

She had worked out a system that had served her well for years. Obviously, she did not write each letter herself, but had the Hogwarts Quill produce them en masse from a template. All the birds of the owlery hovered nearby, ready to deliver the letters throughout Magical Britain.

For all that, he thought she looked harassed, after he knocked and was invited in to her office. Meticulous as she was, the letters resisted organization: Parchment flew about, folding itself, flying past the seal. Green ink and purple wax puddled on the floor, despite her efforts and those of the house elves.

She gave him a sharp glance. "Come to make yourself useful?"

"I certainly hope not," he grunted. "I've had all I care for of making myself useful in the dungeons today. I'm about to grow bonespurs from all the Skele-Gro I've brewed."

"Puir wee laddie," she said, utterly without sympathy, catching the latest parchment escaping from the Quill, and waving it off in the proper direction. "Wayward things. I sometimes wonder if the Quill wants these children here at all."

Snape slumped into a chair. "I can think of one of the little buggers I'd prefer not to see."

She pressed her lips together reprovingly. "Pull yourself together, Severus. He's only a child."

"Only The Child-of-Destiny-Who-Lived-to-Rule-All-Hogwarts. Can you imagine how spoiled rotten he is?"

"I have met Draco Malfoy," she replied, peering over her glasses, brows raised.

Snape scoffed, watching the owls catch each whizzing letter in unfailing talons. "He's bound to be worse."

A letter fluttered by, and Snape was distracted by it.

Neville Longbottom

The Terribly Untidy Room with all the Plants

Longbottom Lodge

Lancs.

Minerva was quiet for a moment, letting another piece of parchment fly, and then remarked, "I'm not too sure of that. Who knows what those wretched muggles he lives with have done to him?"

"Lily's sister and her husband. I daresay they dote on him."

"Possibly. Possibly not. I told Albus—" she scowled and vanished another splotch of green. "—I told him that I had taken a look at them, and that they were the worst sort of muggle—smug and suburban and small-minded. Scarcely a book in the house, and the two of them slobbering over their own little boy in a very unhealthy way. It all gave me a very bad feeling."

"The idea of Harry Potter here gives me a very bad feeling. I daresay Albus had his reasons."

"Well, obviously the boy's godfather—" She paused, and a quick flash of misery spread over her stern face, and was just as quickly overcome.

"Quite," Snape replied after a moment of deep and holy satisfaction. The murderer Sirius Black was safely in Azkaban, where he belonged, and where he could threaten no one else. It had taken the lives of thirteen muggles and his friend Pettigrew to convince the wizarding world of what Snape had known for years: Black was a killer—a violent sociopath without any regard for the lives of others. If his

homicidal tendencies had been nipped in the bud, back in those dreadful school years... Well, as far as he was concerned, those unnecessary deaths lay directly at the Headmaster's door. Dumbledore had viewed Black's attack on Snape's life as a merry prank gone wrong. Snape had known better then, and did not mind being proved to have been right all along.

Nonetheless, Black had been the Potter child's guardian, and with his incarceration, Albus had stepped in, and placed the child not with any of his eager wizarding relations, but with Lily Potter's muggle sister. No one had seen him since, other than a few pushing gawkers. No doubt it was intended to keep the boy safe, but Snape wondered, judging from his own experience, if life in the muggle world was really a good thing for any wizarding child.

Curious in spite of himself, he asked, "Does Albus visit the boy?"

A letter flew by, and Snape snorted at the address:

Draco Malfoy

The Green Room. (It's NOT Called the Nursery Anymore!)

Malfoy Manor

Wilts

"No," Minerva replied, with a disapproving scowl. "No one has been allowed to visit. I asked if I might, a few years back, and Albus told me he had promised the aunt to leave them alone. That did not speak well for her, as far as I was concerned."

"I quite agree." Another letter flew by, lazily spiraling in the fresh breeze from the window. Snape saw the name, and summoned it.

Harry Potter

The Cupboard Under the Stairs

Number 4, Privet Drive

Little Whinging, Surrey.

Snape's eyes widened. What's this?

With an attempt at unconcern, he asked, "Does the address reflect the child's current location at the moment the letter is addressed?"

"No," Minerva answered irritably. "That would be impossibly difficult. It's generally directed to the place where the child regularly sleeps. Now if you don't mind, I'm very busy, even if you're slacking off."

"Do you read the addresses as you work?"

"I hardly have time!"

Snape studied the heavy yellow parchment thoughtfully, and set it aside.

How very interesting. The Cupboard Under the Stairs. The words rattled about in his head, conjuring unpleasant visions, recalling ugly memories. As a child, he had been locked in a wardrobe on occasion and he disliked small spaces to this day. He thought more seriously about his memories of Petunia: how unpleasant she had been to him personally, and how bitter and jealous of Lily she became over the years.

She wouldn't dare—or would she? He snorted. Why not? A helpless child at her mercy with no one overseeing her...an opportunity to get a bit of her own back...Lily's parents long dead, of course...Dumbledore's promise of no interference...There's no one, absolutely no one to prevent her from treating the boy exactly as she likes.

"Do you simply send the letters out and hope for the best?"

"What? Of course not. I visit the muggleborn children personally." She jerked her chin, indicating a small stack of envelopes on the desk. "Otherwise we'd never hear from them. Where would they find an owl?"

He smirked. "Do you think Harry Potter has access to an owl?"

She saw the letter on the table beside him and glared at him. "Don't try to stop the letters going out, Severus. Unpleasant things would happen to you."

"The thought never crossed my mind."

It appeared that Minerva was nearing the bottom of the list of names. The Quill wrote the letters, Minerva signed them, the parchment fluttered itself dry, and the Quill addressed the letter. It gathered up a supply list from a waiting pile, and folded itself neatly. It was then passed under a glass globe filled with warm purple wax and promptly punched with a wet and hearty smack that resembled a kiss. If Minerva did not catch the letter to add to the muggleborn stack, the letter flew to the waiting owl and was gone in a moment.

The rhythm was almost hypnotic. Snape watched the process, thinking about the son of James Potter. Then he thought about the son of Lily Evans. Then he thought about the poor-relation nephew of Petunia. If only the child were a girl, he thought. I could think of a girl as Lily's more easily.

It was rather pleasing to imagine a young James Potter reduced to poverty and sleeping in a boot cupboard. It was not so pleasing to imagine Lily in the same situation. Petunia has a husband and a child of her own. Perhaps there is some rivalry? She wouldn't want her sister's child to outshine her son the way Lily always outshone Petunia herself. I wonder if the husband is a restraining influence. The address would seem to indicate otherwise. Perhaps this Mr Dursley is a weakling, dominated by Petunia. The girl was horribly shrill at times—and spiteful, too.

James Potter's son. The bully's son bullied in his turn. What had ten years with Petunia done to the child? Snape grimaced. Dumbledore behaved as if he had never heard of abused or traumatized children, and when told of cases, tended to dismiss them as exaggerations. It was a constant puzzlement to Snape. Dumbledore had known generations of students, many of whom arrived bearing mental and

physical scars. Only a blind state of denial could explain the Headmaster's blithe optimism.

Perhaps Dumbledore's childhood was perfectly idyllic, and he cannot imagine anything else. Ten years in a cupboard? The boy may be half-mad. He may be neurotic, withdrawn, repressed, hopelessly damaged. So much for the Boy-Who-Lived. Does Dumbledore think of him only as a symbol?

It was time to say something, he decided. "I know Lily's sister rather well, actually. We grew up in the same town, the Evans girls and I. Petunia resented Lily from the day she got her Hogwarts letter. She may not like sending her nephew to Hogwarts. Perhaps I should pay a call on her and discuss it."

"Really, Severus," Minerva protested, "the responsibility is mine."

"But you have all the rest to attend to."

"They won't be allowed to refuse to send him to Hogwarts, you know."

Snape could imagine Dumbledore's response to anyone who tried it. "I would imagine not. I'm sure I can make it clear that that is not an option."

"Perhaps my appearance might be salutary."

"Oh, yes, I daresay," sneered Snape. "Mine, however, might be even more so."

She paused in her work, eyeing him narrowly. "You disliked her."

"I dislike everyone."

"Don't be too intimidating, Severus."

"I shall be exactly as intimidating as I need to be."

She laughed ruefully. "If she really is uncooperative, I expect you to take young Harry for his supplies yourself. Dumbledore has his Gringotts key. Do you think you're equal to giving the grand tour of Diagon Alley to Harry Potter?"

He frowned, and gave her a considering nod. He picked up the letter again, careful to keep the address from Minerva, and thrust it into a pocket. His lips quirked, remembering himself as a wide-eyed small boy, holding the hand of a small, equally wide-eyed Lily. It was a precious memory, carefully guarded from the greatest practitioners of Legilimancy. The smile curdled a little. It should have been James Potter who took his small son to see the wizarding world for the first, ravishing, glorious, unbelievable time. How Potter would have strutted down the Alley, waving at his friends, making grand entrances as he showed off his heir at all the shops. Snape pictured father and son lingering over the Quidditch supplies. But James Potter was dead, and would be rolling—no, thrashing-- in his grave to see himself replaced by his hated enemy. The thought made him feel a trifle giddy.

"Yes," he answered aloud, feeling cheerful for the first time in weeks. "I can think of no one better."

At lunchtime, Dumbledore was quite astonished at Snape's involvement in the case: astonished, and perhaps (though this was well-hidden) not entirely pleased, despite a beaming smile.

"My dear boy, I am so pleased to see you letting bygones be bygones. Do you really wish to deliver Harry's letter personally?"

"I believe it will save time in the end, Headmaster," he replied, all of his mental shields in place. "I have no desire to make more of a to-do over a first-year student than necessary. Besides, I confess a slight curiosity to see Petunia Evans after so many years."

"If you really believe there will be some difficulty, Hagrid would be more than willing—"

"I am not afraid of difficulties," he replied, rather stiffly, "and I have other errands in the Alley. A brief diversion. As I told Minerva," he remarked, nodding in her direction, "I am the best qualified person: I know the aunt personally, and as a halfblood who lived in the muggle world in childhood, I can anticipate Potter's questions and concerns better than anyone else here."

Albus peered at him, with just a touch of reproach. "I do hope," he said gently, "that you are not looking upon this as an opportunity for an act of retribution on James Potter. While I know that the two of you had your differences as students, it would be very, very wrong if you were visit your resentment on an innocent boy. I daresay young Harry is much like his father, and that might cause you to brood over wounds that should have healed long ago--"

Minerva broke in, rather sharply. "They certainly should have, and you oughtn't to stir the pot by bringing them up again, Albus. It was very thoughtful of Severus to offer to help me. He was quite right to point out that Harry will have no way to reply. Besides, it's important that someone else understand this process—"

Dumbledore smiled again, and waved a hand to calm her. "Yes, yes, my dear Minerva. There is much in what you say. It was very kind of Severus—very kind indeed. Nonetheless, my boy, if you find yourself too busy this afternoon, it will be no trouble at all for Hagrid to go." He gave Snape another searching glance, combining hope with doubt—a glance Snape had seen all too often.

He grimaced and looked away, attacking his roast beef vindictively. His thoughts whirled. What was the old man at? The Headmaster's words had brought to mind how much James Potter had done to torment him. Minerva's intervention had calmed him somewhat, and now he was wondering what game Dumbledore was playing.

He did not want Snape to retrieve the Potter boy. That much was clear. However, he did not want to forbid him outright, since that would be impolitic, as Minerva had already agreed. Despite his fair words, his demeanor was clearly meant to discourage. In this situation, it roused Snape's curiosity. Was there something wrong with the boy? Something he did not want Snape to see?

Dumbledore had not insisted that Minerva go herself, but had wished to substitute Hagrid. Why? Hagrid had always treated Snape well, but no one could accuse the fellow of being the ideal choice to advise a new student, or to explain the intricacies of the wizarding world. What made Hagrid so desirable?

He was big and imposing, of course, which made Snape suspect that the Headmaster did in fact expect "difficulties." Perhaps Dumbledore knew a great deal about the boy's situation, and that in turn raised a train of thought that Snape had no time to explore. What else?

Minerva was shrewd and observant, and if there were something amiss in Petunia's household, she would pick up on it immediately. Hagrid was unlikely to notice silent hostility, at least, and might not think to mention it. Furthermore, Hagrid was an ardent old Gryffindor, and vocal about it. Unlike McGonagall, who was scrupulously fair, he would likely prejudice the boy in favor of his parents' house, and fill the child's ears with tales of his father's shining qualities. Snape vowed that if he could prevent nothing else, he would make it his mission to prevent that. And yes, Hagrid was personally loyal to Dumbledore—all right, fair enough. Dumbledore wanted the boy to be given the most admiring, laudatory image of Dumbledore possible. Perhaps it was an old man's harmless vanity. It could also mean that Dumbledore regarded the boy as important enough that he wanted to be able to influence and manipulate his actions. He had long understood that Dumbledore believed the Dark Lord would return someday. There was that cursed, abominable prophecy—

The one that will vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...

The juicy roast beef tasted of dust and ashes. Despite Dumbledore's dire predictions, Snape personally believed that the prophecy had already been fulfilled, and thus was of no further value. As an infant, The Boy-Who-Lived had indeed vanquished the Dark Lord. Snape wondered if the boy was cognizant of his status. Since Petunia had not seen fit to capitalize on it in any way, it was possible—just possible—that he was not.

What would be the affect on an ignorant boy, coming from the humdrum life of muggles, to find that he was a hero? To find out that magic was real, and that he was already a famous wizard? Would he coast through life because of something that he could not possibly remember, with all his glories behind him? It would be all too easy to mold such a boy into the semblance of his reckless, shallow, impulsive father.

On the other hand, if Snape would not step aside in favor of Hagrid, Dumbledore's fallback plan might be for Snape to meet Famous Harry Potter angrily and resentfully, to willfully ignore any problems evident in the boy's life—perhaps to maliciously withhold such information from others. That would inevitably push the boy toward anyone who seemed to be Snape's opposite number. By reminding Snape of his most painful grievances, Dumbledore was subtly encouraging him to do his worst.

Snape hissed at his defenseless plate, realizing that he had almost fallen in with the old man's scheme. His curiosity was now aroused to the highest degree. He must play this carefully, seeming to be uninterested, even slightly contemptuous of the boy—hardly difficult—and yet intent on his duty. He would get the key from Dumbledore immediately. He would probably have to accompany the child to the Potter vault. That was a bonus. Perhaps he could have a glimpse of the Potter wealth, the fame of which had been a weapon in James Potter's hands. Snape did not care much about money, per se, but he had often pondered what he could have done with his life—the places he could have seen, the studies he could have pursued--had he been as rich as Lucius Malfoy or the Black Family—or Potter. He certainly would not be endlessly reliving his wretched youth as a teacher in his old school. Potter had been rich, certainly—a careless, rich pureblood—so rich that he could marry a muggleborn witch with no money of her own and carry it all off effortlessly.

Of course, Lily had been very special. Any other muggleborn witch would have looked foolish and awkward and out of place in the circles Lily had married into. Lily had never looked out of place in her life. If the boy could model himself after his mother, now, there would be hope for him. Snape pictured a small head bent over a pile of books:

a diligent student, not sliding by like his father on charm and raw talent...

Dumbledore appeared to be nearly finished with his pastries. The remains of the overloaded plate of sugary dainties made Snape a little queasy, as he contemplated the smeared gobbets of brown and red and pale green. It reminded him of the aftermath of an Entrail-Expelling Curse.

"I shall need Potter's Gringotts key," he announced crisply, setting down his own fork with a silvery clink.

"Today?" Dumbledore looked at him in incredulity. "Surely it is too early for Harry to receive his letter."

Minerva was listening, and swiftly interposed. "No, Albus. Harry's eleventh birthday is today. I had planned to send the letter, but Severus will hand-deliver it. And the sooner the better," was her muttered addendum.

Snape refrained from smirking. At times Minerva could be a cunning and powerful ally.

"Today?" Dumbledore repeated. "His birthday? Perhaps it would interrupt his aunt's arrangements for his birthday party. The boy may be surrounded by his young friends. Hardly a discreet situation in which to reveal such sensitive information. Surely tomorrow would be better, Severus—"

"It is convenient for me to attend to this today, and I would have thought I had established my credentials for secrecy and discretion." Snape was tired of games. "The boy can consider the letter a birthday gift. The key, if you please, Headmaster."

He looked directly in Dumbledore's eyes, and thought, with no attempt to shield his mind, Sod all if I'm going to wait for morning. Dumbledore's bushy eyebrows rose in mild surprise, but the key was duly handed over. Snape gave the table a curt nod and strode away, girding himself to face an old acquaintance and a noisy children's party in darkest Surrey.

Chapter 2

Every time he allowed himself to forget the mundane, soul-crushing ugliness of the muggle world, it somehow forced itself on his notice. Snape's journey to find young Potter was not short. The Headmaster had not offered him the use of his office floo, and Snape was forced to take the walk beyond the Hogwarts gates in order to apparate to London. Once there, he had to make his way to—

--Little Whinging, he shuddered. What an unspeakably awful name. The fact that Petunia would consent to live in a place so designated spoke volumes about her.

There's no accounting for lack of taste.

He could not apparate to a place unknown to him. The train ride from London to Surrey did not improve his mood. He was ready to be affronted by everything: by the vulgar omnipresent advertising, by the sight of roads packed with vehicles spewing their foulness into the air, by the shrieks and giggles of young muggles crowding into the train. Snape bitterly regretted his inability to take points and assign detentions. The teens, for their part, seemed to find his appearance a source of diversion and merriment. Snape sneered at a pierced and tattooed youth, and received an explicitly rude gesture in reply.

"Bugger off, Dracula!"

The lout's companions applauded this witticism. Snape was indignant.

He was was not, as his students might have predicted, dressed entirely in black. For these forays into the muggle world he invariably dressed in a treasured tweed jacket with leather elbow patches that he had always thought rather dashing. His trousers were crisp khaki twill. Only his turtleneck was black. He had gone to great lengths to blend in with the muggle world.

Unfortunately, there were so many muggle worlds: the World of Muggle Academics, the World of the Country Gentry, the World of Working Folk, the World of Layabouts on the Dole. One never knew into which muggle world one might be precipitously hurled. Snape

was now confronted with the World of Unregenerate Youth, and the muggle version was far more uncouth than anything the wizarding world had spawned. They bellowed and screeched and belched and farted. Their conversation was composed almost entirely of obscenities. When they swaggered out of the train, not knowing whom they had offended, Snape thought wistfully of what he might have done to them twelve years before. However, he was one of the righteous now, and had to be satisfied with a surreptitious tripping hex that tumbled the young people down the steps and onto their faces. Their surprised squeals and shockingly filthy curses were abruptly cut off by the closing of the doors. Snape smirked as he looked back at the pile of thrashing, leather-clad yobs.

The essential balance of the universe was restored. Snape sat back, smiling faintly until he reached Little Whinging. Even the intrusive, lilting conversation of the Jamaican-born cabdriver could not much disturb him. His thoughts returned to his visit today. He was glad he had made an effort to look prosperous, albeit in a somewhat Bohemian way. Petunia had despised his poverty in their youth. He was Somebody now, after all.

The cab slowed to a stop, and Snape glanced up.

"Privet Drive?"

"This is the place, mon." The driver flashed him a white grin.

Snape blew out a long breath as the cab pulled away. Standing on the kerb, he straightened to his full height and sneered.

This was the World of the Respectable Middle-Class. Oh, very respectable indeed. It was one of the muggle worlds in which he did not feel quite at home. Neat, anonymous houses stood like soldiers at attention, each with a scrap of painfully tidy lawn. Snape supposed he could have worn something more formal, but his funds did not run to bespoke suits. If he were to dress like Lucius Malfoy, he would need Lucius Malfoy's vault. Besides, he did not want to look like someone from the City. He liked his tweed jacket. It gave him a feeling of debonair individuality, something this dull suburb sorely lacked.

Number Four was before him. There was no sign of a party, unless the three boys roughhousing in the front garden represented one. The smallest, however, clearly was not dressed for festivities, and was digging weeds out of the humdrum flowerbed. The other two boys were kicking pea gravel into his face as he worked. Snape scowled, seeing the child's dark hair and the ragged, oversized shirt. In his own childhood he had been humiliated by the ugly second-hand smocks his mother had given him to wear. A pureblood herself, she had never quite grasped muggle style, and had not understood how it pained her son to look ridiculous. She had not even understood that he did.

He could not waste time on the small boy, no matter how much the unfortunate child recalled his own youth. The boy was obviously too young to be Potter. Snape looked instead at the two bullies. One of them must be The Boy Who Lived, though he shuddered at the thought.

The fat one—surely not. The features and the blond hair could not belong to the child of James Potter and Lily Evans. With a heavy heart, Snape focused on the third boy.

Brown hair—possible. Scrawny—perhaps. Both Lily and Potter had been slender people, though on this boy it was awkward and unattractive. Snape swelled with contempt at the rat-like features and the hateful expression. He could have predicted that Potter would ruin Lily's offspring, even to his appearance. Snape sighed and made himself walk over to them. Fat Boy hit the small child on the side of the head with a plastic box of some sort, and Rat Boy cheered him on. The child flinched only slightly, and kept digging weeds. This did not suit his tormentors.

"Hey, Freak!" Fat Boy blustered. "Wanna go with us to the arcade?"

"Reckon he doesn't have the money," giped Rat Boy.

"He doesn't have anything," Fat Boy declared with satisfaction. "He has to work if he wants any dinner. We don't put up with shiftless, lazy slackers in our house!" To punctuate his words, he hit the child again.

"Ow!" The boy objected, "Lay off, Dudders!"

"Don't call me that, freak!" The plastic box was smashed over the child's dark head, and there was an ominous crack. Fat Boy looked at his box in dismay, and ran howling into Number Four. "Mum! Mum! The freak broke my Game Boy!" Rat Boy scurried after him, adding his shouts to the insufferable noise. The small kneeling boy rubbed his head with one hand, and held himself upright with the other.

Horrible foreboding trickled down Snape's spine. He crossed the perfect green lawn, made so no doubt by vile muggle pesticides that killed anything but grass.

Taking a deep breath, he asked the boy. "Are you hurt?"

Thin shoulders twitched in surprise, and the boy turned, still rubbing rumpled dark hair. Snape gasped, looking into green eyes he had never dared hope to see again in life.

"I'm all right, sir," was the quiet answer. "He knocked my glasses off, though. Do you see them?"

Under the wild fringe of black hair lay a scar shaped like a lightning bolt. No doubt remained. Snape covered his confusion and elevated heartbeat by peering at the ground. He took another step and winced at the crunch under his boot. The boy hissed in dismay as Snape reached down to retrieve the glasses.

James Potter had worn glasses, of course: glasses with rims of pure gold wire. They had been nothing like these monstrosities. Snape grimaced, seeing he had broken one of the temples.

"Don't worry," the boy reassured him sturdily, getting to his feet. "I can tape it up. Look there—I have to tape them over the nose all the time."

"Nonetheless—" Snape began, thinking that this would be a good opening for a little digging, "—those boys shouldn't have attacked you like that. Perhaps I should speak to your parents—"

"I live with my aunt and uncle. Don't worry about it," the boy repeated, shrugging. "The glasses are rubbish, anyway. When the school nurse said I needed glasses, Aunt Petunia got a pair out of a box at some charity. At least I can sort of see the board at school now."

Snape heard himself asking, "Do you like school?"

"It's all right." The boy said noncommittally.

Without needing to consciously use Legilimancy, Snape heard the boy's unspoken next words.

"Better than here."

"Then, I take it," Snape ventured dryly, "the boy who ran crying to his mother—the rather large boy—is your cousin."

There was a faint, almost inaudible snort. "Yes. Dudley is—rather large."

"Dudley Dursley," Snape muttered, thinking about it. That was Petunia's son? Snape had not been invited to the Evans home after his disastrous fifth year, but he managed to hear news about the family long afterwards. Petunia had married a young businessman, and gossip further indicated that her prospective groom was—what was the word?—"stocky?" "robust?" "big-boned?" "well-set-up?" Snape could not recall the man's first name, and wished he had quizzed Minerva before rushing away. At any rate, Mr Dursley was apparently at work and would not interfere with his conversation with Petunia.

The boy was looking up at him, puzzled. Something about the slight furrow between the eyes painfully recalled Lily. The boy, aside from the black hair, looked a great deal like her. His speech was quiet and polite. Snape was rather pleased with him. Anything was better than Rat Boy.

The Boy-Who-Thankfully-Was-Not-Rat-Boy said, "Yes—Dursley. Do you know them?"

"I know your aunt. Or rather—I knew her a long time ago. I knew your mother, too." He looked down his long nose, and assuming a self-possession that he did not actually feel, said, "I am Professor Severus Snape. You must be Harry Potter."

The green eyes lit with delight. Snape found himself having to repress a smile.

"Yes! That's me! You knew my mum?" The delight faded. "Was she nice?"

This was asked with some uncertainty. Snape wondered what Petunia had said about her. Very firmly, he answered, "Your mother and I were good friends as children. She was a wonderful girl: very bright and charming. An excellent student, too. We went to school together." The boy seemed pleased by this, and Snape decided it was time to be more forthcoming. "Actually, that's why I'm here." He pulled the heavy envelope from the inside pocket of his tweed jacket. "Since you turned eleven today, I came to deliver your Hogwarts letter."

The boy stared at him, obviously not understanding. Warily, he reached for the letter. "This is for me?"

"Yes!" Snape said curtly. "Of course! The letters always come out in the summer, after the student turns eleven. Have a look at it, and then we'll go in and make the arrangements with your aunt." He forced out, "Happy Birthday, Mr Potter."

Another smile, somewhat bewildered. "You know it's my birthday?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Obviously."

The boy ducked his head, still puzzled, and broke the seal. Holding his glasses to his face, he glanced over the letter. Looking up at Snape, his green eyes full of fear and hope, he whispered, "Is this a joke?"

Irritated, Snape scowled. "Certainly not. Do you think I have nothing better to do than to play pranks on children? Your name's been down for Hogwarts since the day you were born."

"Hogwarts—" the boy read uncertainly, trying out the words. "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." The boy narrowed his eyes and asked, "Are you saying that they teach witchcraft at your school?"

He doesn't know anything! "We teach Magic, Mr Potter. Hogwarts is the finest school of Magic in the world. Did your aunt never tell you about Hogwarts?"

"Never! She and Uncle Vernon have fits if I even say the word 'magic!' Are you saying that magic is real?"

"Here." Abruptly, Snape snatched the broken glasses from the boy's hand. He glanced about to see if anyone might be watching. Seeing no one, he drew his wand from his sleeve and flicked it sharply. "Reparo!" With a lifted brow, he handed the good-as-new glasses back.

The boy grabbed at them, and shoved them onto his face. His green eyes, already wide with wonder, were magnified ridiculously by the lenses. "That was brilliant! So I can learn to be a witch and do things like that?"

"A wizard," Snape corrected him quickly, glad that no pureblood was nearby to hear that socially fatal error. "Men are wizards, women are witches. And you don't learn to be a wizard. You are a wizard, and you will learn to use the magic that is already within you."

Harry shook his head, looking very discouraged. "I'm sorry, sir—Professor Snape. I think you've made a mistake. I don't think I could be a wizard. I'm Harry—just Harry!"

Snape cocked his head. "Really? I assure you that you are certainly a wizard. Perhaps you have already done magic. Has anything—unusual—ever happened that no one else could explain?"

A pause was filled with growing excitement. Then—"Yes!" The boy burst out. "Once when I was running from Dudley and his gang, I ended up on the roof of the school! And once I turned the teacher's hair blue," he confessed. "I got in so much trouble for that!"

Snape frowned. "It could not have been your fault. You shouldn't 'get in trouble' for such a thing."

"Well, I did. Anyway, there was this time when Aunt Petunia tried to cut my hair—she hates my hair—and it was awful, and overnight it all grew back!"

Snape was intrigued. Some latent ability as a metamorphagus? We shall see.

Harry's grin widened. "But the best thing was when we went to the zoo for Dudley's birthday. We went to the reptile house, and Dudley was tapping on the glass and bothering this snake, and then he went away, and I was talking with it, and then Dudley and Piers wanted to see, and the glass vanished! And the snake got away," he added.

"You—talked to the snake?"

"Well--yes. He understood what I was saying, anyway. Is that a wizard sort of thing?"

"Very." Harry Potter is a parselmouth? This astonishing piece of news was tucked away for further consideration. What will Albus think?

Instantly he said, "The power to communicate with snakes not unknown, but it is a very rare gift. Sometimes unusual abilities make other people uneasy. I would keep that particular talent a secret, Mr Potter. It's always handy to know something that other people don't."

"OK."

"And now I think it's time that I had a word with your aunt."

"I don't know, sir," the boy said, looking worried. "All these things on this list...I don't have any money, you know. Aunt Petunia won't like it."

"How unpleasant for her. I assure you that your parents left you well provided for."

This was clearly news to young Potter. "They—" he said with a nod to the house, "are always saying that I'm stealing the food out of Dudley's mouth."

"Clearly," Snape sneered, "you haven't been stealing enough."

The boy laughed, then: a fresh, sweet sound that once again recalled happier times to Snape. Favoring the boy with a benign look that was not quite a smile, he gestured peremptorily to the front door. The laugh died on the boy's lips and he looked anxiously at the flowerbed.

"What is it now?" Snape asked impatiently.

"I've got to get the weeding done before Uncle Vernon comes home," Harry told him urgently. "It'll just take a few minutes. If he comes home, and I'm not done—"

A flick of Snape's wand, and dandelions, thistles, and sorrel flew out of the ground, roots and all. Another flick, and the weeds vanished completely.

"Whoa!" Harry breathed. "Magic is really useful! You must really know a lot!"

Snape smirked, pleased despite himself at the artless admiration of his old enemy's son. Take that, James Potter!

With a flourish, he holstered his wand. "And now, if you're quite ready..."

Harry led the way. "I'd better tell you that it stinks in there. Aunt Petunia was dyeing some of Dudley's old clothes grey to make my

uniform for Stonewall High. It looks like somebody skinned an elephant!"

Snape snorted. "And Dudley is the elephant? I daresay he would look like one in a grey uniform."

"Actually, he's going to Smeltings, Uncle Vernon's old school. It's very posh. Smeltings boys wear a maroon tailcoat, orange knickerbockers and flat straw hats. And they carry sticks to hit people with," he added grimly.

"I'd pay a great deal of money never to see your cousin wearing orange knickerbockers." Snape considered, and asked, "Does the idea of not going to—what?—Stonewall High-- disappoint you?"

"Crikey, no! Not if I can learn magic instead!" Harry added, "Mind you, I wasn't exactly upset at the idea of going to a different school. Dudley and his mates always bullied anybody who wanted to be my friend. And I got into trouble if I ever made better marks than Dudley, so I learned not to do that quick smart."

"You shouldn't let anyone keep you from doing your best, " Snape reproached him, with a teacher's natural reflex.

The boy looked up at him skeptically, his young face full of an old man's cynicism.

Snape thought Albus had much to answer for. "Everything will be different now," he said, hoping he was not making promises that he could not keep.

Harry opened the door for him. Once again, Snape was pleased by his manners. Lily had had nice manners, except when furiously angry.

The telly was on. Petunia was not watching it. Instead, she was sipping tea: ensconced in a pink armchair and engrossed by a gossip magazine. Fat Boy and Rat Boy were stuffing their faces, laughing as a man with a chainsaw pursued a scantily-clad young girl. Fat Boy looked up, and his small eyes nearly disappeared as his cheeks swelled in a gloating grin.

"Mum! The freak's in the house!" He crammed a fistful of crisps into his mouth. Crumbs spewed out with his taunts. "You're in trouble now!"

Snape stepped into view. "I believe—not. He's not in trouble, and he's certainly not a freak."

Startled, Petunia looked up, face frozen in shock. The teacup slipped from her fingers, splashing brown onto the creamy-white carpet. She stammered, "It can't be!"

Snape sneered, "Good to see you too, Petunia. I just popped by—" he smirked as she winced—"to give Harry his school letter. We'll be going shopping for his things now. That doesn't upset your plans for his birthday celebration, I hope?"

Note: Thanks to all my reviewers. I'm pleased at the initial response. I'll attempt to get back to you as soon as my work permits!

Chapter 3

The years, Snape saw, had been no kinder to Petunia than to himself. She had always been a scraggy, gawky girl, much taller than Lily. Snape had fancied that maturity and motherhood might have softened her a little, especially in a household where the child was so blatantly overfed.

Such was not the case. Even had her expression not been one of fear and loathing, which Snape considered just about the least attractive on a human face, she would not have been called "soft." The bones at jaw and cheekbone and wrist stood out like razors. Her hard, hateful look shifted downward to her nephew, and Snape felt the boy recoil. When Petunia glanced back up at him, Snape easily caught a complacent image of bashing at the boy with an iron frying pan. He stared back, remembering an episode with his drunken muggle father and an empty bottle of gin. He took a threatening step forward.

Petunia squealed and backed away, stumbling. "Dudley darling," she shrilled, "take Piers and go to the cinema. Buy yourself a treat!"

"But Mum--" Dudley whined.

She made a dash for her purse, and fumbled for some money. She pressed it into her son's hand, and screeched, "Out! Get out! I don't want you exposed to these freaks!" She slapped the television off, and placed herself between the back door and Snape, guarding Dudley's retreat.

"Crikey!" Piers shouted. "Twenty pounds!"

Even Dudley seemed a little surprised at such bounty, but he did not stay to protect his mother from this unwelcome guest. He and Piers were already planning the rest of their afternoon. The boys exited out the back door, laughing, while Petunia's eyes remained fixed on Snape.

Hearing the door slam, she relaxed a little, and shouted, "He won't go to that place! I won't have it!"

"Petunia," Snape smirked, "surely you always knew that this day would come. Harry Potter is going to Hogwarts School—" he raised his voice to a bellow, "—of Witchcraft and Wizardry!" He smirked again as Petunia flinched.

Drawing the shreds of dignity about her, she drew herself up and declared, "He can't go. He hasn't a penny of his own, and we certainly won't pay the fees!"

"His fees are already paid," Snape countered. He was not sure it was true, but he did not want to tell Petunia anything about the Potter fortune she did not already know. She had never gone to Diagon Alley, at least to his knowledge, and would not know how to get at the boy's inheritance. "He is going to Hogwarts on September first. We are going to Diagon Alley to purchase his books, his supplies, and his uniform." He gave a great sniff of disgust. "So you see, filling your house with that appalling stench was quite pointless." He cocked his head in Harry's direction. "Mr Potter, please go to your room and change quickly into something more appropriate for shopping than your gardening clothes."

Harry paused, rather ashamed, now that it came to it, that someone other than the family might see that he had only a cupboard. He glanced at Aunt Petunia, whose face was mottled red and white with fury. He bit his lip. This strange wizard seemed friendly, but at the end of the day, Harry would still be living here...

"It's quite all right, Mr Potter," Snape told him quietly, understanding the boy's reluctance in part. He showed Harry the address on his letter, and read it aloud for Petunia's sake. "Harry Potter, the Cupboard Under the Stairs-" Petunia's eyes widened in panic."--Number Four Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey." He glared at Petunia in contempt. "I know all about it. That's one of the reasons I'm here."

Watching Aunt Petunia from the corner of his eye, Harry went to his cupboard. Snape's eyes were on Petunia, too, as he followed the boy. "However, I would like to verify this for myself. Would you allow me to have a look, Mr Potter?"

Blushing, Harry stood back, while Snape folded himself nearly double, trying to fit into the cramped little closet. Along with the clutter of dust mops and brooms and pails, there was a cot mattress, eked out with a ragged blanket on the floor. Bare wooden shelves held a few neatly folded garments. There were school papers and drawings—some marked with his teacher's praise—taped to the back of the stairs. The light was a single bare bulb. Far back in the shadows were hidden the boy's secret treasures: a few plastic soldiers, a thin pad of unlined paper, some broken crayons, two dog-eared books without covers. A sheet of paper, also taped up, proudly declared this to be "Harry's Room." Snape felt his blood pressure rising—at the thought of the vicious woman not twelve feet away, of the blindly stupid teachers at the boy's school, of Albus, who had arranged this travesty.

This was not the bedroom of the pampered Boy-Who-Lived: it was the lair of a house elf.

Trying to control his face, Snape eased his way out of the cupboard. "Get changed now, Mr Potter," he ordered the boy, his burning glare fixed on Petunia. Harry shut the cupboard, and there were some soft noises as the boy struggled to change in the confined space.

Snape kept his gaze on the terrified Petunia. "Don't say a word," he hissed. His wand was in his hand, and felt good there. His blood was racing. It was like the old days. He was not sure what he would do: anything could happen. He waited in menacing silence, while Petunia grimaced and fidgeted.

In less than two minutes, the boy emerged, nearly swimming in an enormous blue sweatshirt and over-sized slacks held up by a belt that wrapped twice around his waist. He was still wearing his worn trainers. Snape raised his brows. "Is that the best you have?"

Harry assumed a look of proud indifference. "They're clean. I laundered them myself."

"I daresay you did, Mr Potter. I simply meant to point out to your Aunt, in case she hadn't noticed, that these clothes are clearly her son's,

not yours." He asked Petunia, "When did you last buy the boy clothes that fit him?"

Petunia protested furiously, "We never asked to be burdened with him! He's a millstone around our necks! We can't be expected to scrimp and save and deprive our own child—"

"Shut up and sit down!" Snape roared, at the end of his patience. Petunia collapsed onto the couch, mouth open. Snape snarled at her, "You haven't deprived that greedy brat of anything. Listen to yourself, you stupid woman! You're not talking to some dithering pureblood! It's me! Severus Snape! I grew up across the play park! I know about child benefits and I know you would have milked the system for every penny you could get! I know you must get benefits for this boy, and I know you must collect a guardian's allowance for him as well! What the bloody hell have you done with it?"

She mouthed a little before answering. "We give him a roof over his head, the ungrateful brat—"

"Oh, I see," Snape said mockingly. "Your husband is out of work. He's on the dole. You don't know where your next meal is coming from. You just happened to find that big telly over there!" He barked a harsh laugh at Petunia's indignant expression. "Then get a job, you lazy cow! Don't steal the boy's money!"

"I have money?" Harry wondered to himself. This was very interesting.

Petunia shrieked and threw herself at Snape, hands out to claw him. Snape hexed her almost lazily. She sat down abruptly on the couch again, looking shocked. When she tried to get up, Snape rolled his eyes and hexed her again.

"Immobilus!"

Instantly she was motionless, but for her eyes, blinking rapidly in panic. Harry looked up at Snape, very impressed.

"I want to learn that one!"

"All in good time, Mr Potter. First, I want to make some arrangements about your living conditions. Is the cupboard really the only place for you? Why couldn't you share your cousin's room?"

On second thought, he entirely understood Harry's look of horror at that idea. Snape hastily went on, "Or is there an spare room—or an attic—or something that would be better than this?"

Snape felt a little exasperated as the boy looked at the floor and shrugged. Snape sighed again. "Let's have a look about, Mr Potter. Something may come to me."

He had disliked the lounge on first sight, but some the house was not at all bad. He admired the spacious kitchen, and the eating area was pleasant. The back garden was well kept—no doubt by the boy. There was, however, nothing that looked like a suitable place for a young wizard to sleep and think and study. Perhaps he would have better luck elsewhere.

Upstairs were the bedrooms and a large bathroom. The house was no Malfoy Manor, but it was a comfortable—nearly luxurious—middle class home. It was infinitely better than Spinner's End, and really much larger and more attractive than the old Evans house where Petunia and Lily had grown up, and where Snape had often visited. Petunia might well feel she had gone up in the world. Harry's "Uncle Vernon" had done his duty to her, at least as material things were measured.

Nonetheless, Snape felt a certain distaste. Knowing that the house was Petunia's had no doubt prejudiced him against it, and the fussy floral décor did not recommend itself to him. But there was something else here that put him off. Perhaps it was something subtle in the smell: some of the stink of the harsh clothing dye wafting up from the laundry; the odors of various cleaning fluids and heavy muggle perfumes underlaid with the inevitable, faint trace of the house's occupants. Snape had an extremely keen sense of smell—an essential aid in potions-making—and he knew without meeting the man that he was not going to like Vernon Dursley.

The boy was willing enough to give him the Grand Tour. "That's Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon's room. I'm not allowed in there—not even to clean."

Snape stepped in and took in the room at a glance. Good quality furniture on a rather large scale, everything in muted blues and greens, a wallpaper he could have done without. Snape shrugged and followed the boy down the hall.

"This is Dudley's room," Harry said, very quietly.

It was nearly as large as his parents' room. A wide bed, shelves of toys and games, a desk cluttered not with books and papers, but with electronic gadgets. A large television set was positioned at the foot of the bed. The room was a disgusting mess: on the floor by the bed were empty drink cans and discarded snack wrappers. Snape opened the closet, which was crammed with clothing, shoes, and obviously unused sports equipment.

Beside him, the boy felt the need to apologize. "I did up his room this morning—I made the bed and picked up the rubbish like I'm supposed to, but he was up here with Piers for awhile."

Snape shrugged. "It's hardly your fault that your cousin is a pig. Isn't he capable of picking up his own room? Does he have any assigned tasks at all?"

Harry shook his head. "If he did, he'd make me do them anyway. And next door here--this is his second bedroom."

"Your cousin has a second bedroom?"

Snape stepped to the doorway and looked over the boy's head. A small room, nearly filled with old clothes, unread books, and broken playthings. All together, the things cast aside in here must have cost Dudley's parents hundreds of pounds. "Doesn't he ever throw anything away?"

"Sure," the boy told him. "This is the stuff he didn't want to get rid of." He confided to Snape, "Now and then I can nick something small that

he's forgotten about. I got my action figures that way, and my crayons and books."

There was a single bed in the room, covered with a nondescript blanket. By the window was a small wooden chair. A cheap-looking chest of drawers was the only other furniture. The chair, the bed, and the chest, along with most of the floor, were piled with Dudley's rubbish. Snape grimaced. He wondered if at one time there had been a half-hearted attempt to put together a room for the unwanted nephew. Or perhaps it was deliberate, flagrant insult to the boy next to him. This was not even an outright box room. There was a bed—of sorts. There was chest of drawers and a window. It should be the boy's room, but it was kept in this state as a continual reminder to their nephew that he was unworthy of even a decent place to sleep.

The boy was walking away.

"There's more?" Snape asked.

"The guest room, sir." Harry opened a closed door.

A good-sized room, with good furniture, done in neutral colors. Snape raised his brows. Another unused room?

"Does anyone actually sleep here?"

"Just Aunt Marge." Harry saw Snape's puzzled frown, and informed him, "She's not really my aunt, but I have to call her that. She's Uncle Vernon's sister. She lives in the country and visits one or two times a year." This was said so glumly that Snape understood that "Aunt Marge" was not one of Harry's favorite people.

Snape looked over the room with care. The window was wide, and the room would get good light in the morning. "I think perhaps this should be your room. I'll tell you aunt to see to it."

The boy stared at him in disbelief. "My room? A room for me?"

"Yes," Snape said briskly. "It's ridiculous that they make a show of all this space and don't let you use any of it. I grant that the style is a bit feminine, but that can be altered—"

"Aunt Marge wouldn't like it," Harry warned him.

"I am indifferent to 'Aunt Marge's' opinion. You live here every day and she does not."

"Please, sir--! If I really did get a room of my own, I--I think I'd really rather have Dudley's second bedroom," the boy told him in a breath. He looked up at Snape in appeal. "I could put all the rubbish against the wall, or up in the attic, and I'd be fine."

"Are you sure?" Snape asked, surprised. "This is a great deal bigger. The other room is pretty cramped."

"It'll be fine, sir," the boy insisted. "I don't like this room. It smells like Aunt Marge—and—and Ripper." When Snape raised his brows questioningly, the boy explained. "She breeds dogs. Ripper is her favorite. She likes to set him on me, and he--" he lowered his voice to man-to-man confidentiality "—he pees in the house. They make me clean up after him. I don't want a room he's slept in."

Snape sniffed the air experimentally, curling his lip in disgust. The air was slightly unpleasant, but Snape thought it was mostly due to the bowl of potpourri on the dressing table, which reeked of a scent that perhaps Petunia mistakenly believed to be vanilla. He did not pick up any canine odors at the moment, but sympathized with the boy. Snape was not a dog person himself.

There was no point in forcing something on the boy that had such unpleasant associations. Snape's own boyhood room at Spinner's End had been no bigger than the room the boy wanted. Snape had not thought much of it at the time, but compared to young Potter's cupboard it had been a sanctuary and a refuge and a paradise of comfort. And it spoke well for the boy that he was so modest in his wishes. "Very well," Snape agreed. "Dudders' 'second bedroom' it is."

He had seen enough. He turned and descended the stairs quickly. The boy followed gamely behind, jumping down the last three steps in one excited bound.

Petunia was still helpless on the sofa. Her eyes widened at the sight of them. Snape sneered at her.

"Now listen, Petunia. This is what you're going to do. Listen carefully, because you're going to be very busy for the next few hours, but that won't matter, will it? --As you weren't planning a birthday fête tonight. You're going to go upstairs and clean the room you allow your son to use as his rubbish tip—his 'second bedroom.' It's your nephew's room as of today. You may consider it your birthday present to him. Don't even look an objection at me. It's obscene that Dudley has two rooms and Harry has a cupboard. If you weren't certifiably insane you'd see it. Actually, I think you do see it, since you don't boast of it to your neighbors. What would the neighbors say if they knew the truth about you? You pretend so hard to be normal, Petunia, but it's all a sham. You're not normal at all: you're a sick and depraved child abuser. You look like you'd like to shake your head. You know, I don't think I'm interested in anything you have to say. There's no possible way to defend tormenting and depriving a child—your own sister's son. You and your husband aren't satisfied with being criminals yourselves. You're training your own son to be one too. Don't—just don't. I saw him and his friend Rat Boy—"

Harry grinned widely. He was delighted at the sight of Divine Justice in a tweed jacket; and enchanted by such a perfect name for Piers.

Snape continued ruthlessly. "--He's a bully and a coward, and well on his way to developing into something of a sadist. Something to make your maternal heart swell with pride, it seems. Anyway, we were talking about your day. Get rid of Dudders' rubbish, and clean the room—make the bed, scrub the floors, wash the windows. The furniture is nothing much, but I have ways of dealing with that!" Restlessly, he paced the floor of the lounge, missing the sweep of his robes. "I daresay you've already spent Potter's child benefit for the month, as well as your guardian's allowance—and all on Dudders or your trashy magazines or some such tripe. That stops today. On my return, I expect to receive an envelope containing cash equal to those

two sums. Harry's benefit and his guardian allowance will henceforth be managed by me. I will open a muggle bank account for him and you will deposit every cheque for him in it while he is in school. And don't cheat, Petunia. I can add, after all. You looked pained—"

He waved his wand, and Petunia burst into frantic speech.

"I haven't that much money in the house!"

"Well, you'll just have to tell your husband to get it!" Snape snarled in her face. "You haven't had any trouble spending it in the past, have you, you shameless thief? That brings me to Harry's Uncle Vernon. When he comes back, you will inform him of the changes. You will convince him that it would be best to submit to the new regime. Because, Petunia, if your devoted spouse tries anything on with me, you'll find yourself married to a cockroach—up until the moment I crush him underfoot!" Snape stamped his boot on the floor, and Harry jumped, eyes full of awe. Petunia whimpered, hiding her eyes.

Snape found he enjoyed being a Smiter of the Unjust. "Don't wait dinner for us. Mr Potter and I have a great deal of business to transact, and we shall be dining in town. Expect us around seven or eight, and I can explain things in person to your husband, if necessary." With the corner of his eye, he caught Harry's doubtful look. Apparently, the boy believed it would be entirely necessary. "And I'll have a word with Harry's cousin, too, and let him know that his days of petty tyranny are over. It would be so sad, if Dudley started experiencing all the things you've done to Harry over the years—"

"You can't do this to us!" Petunia screeched. "You lot aren't allowed to harass decent people! I'll call the police—"

Snape's eyes brightened. His lips drew back in a terrible grin.

"You do that, Petunia." He strode to the telephone, and picked it up, shoving it at her. The receiver crashed to the floor. Petunia flinched back, hands in front of her face. Snape felt his anger building. "You just do that! Go on! Call the police! Show them the hideyhole you kept your nephew in! Show the rags you peeled off your great pig of a son

to dress him in! Show them the glasses you found for him in a rubbish tip! Then try to explain to them how you used the boy's money! After they finish working your husband over—the policemen I've known really, really, don't like child abusers—they'll move on to the formal part of your punishment. The two of you will be lucky if you get out of prison in less than ten years! Abuse—neglect—misuse of government monies—I hope your husband has relatives who can take your precious Dudders in, because you won't be seeing him until he's all grown up!" Snape smirked at Petunia, who had backed away in horror. He cocked his head. "Perhaps it is I who should be calling. Shall I?" He started to punch in a number.

"Don't!" Petunia bleated. She wrung her bony hands, and looked about her, as if hoping for help. She saw the open cupboard, and her eyes narrowed just a little. She glanced at Snape, thinning her lips.

Snape loved being a Legilimens at times like these. He flicked his wand again, slamming the cupboard shut. "And don't think you can hide the evidence. No one but Harry or I or the muggle police will be able to open that door. We'll keep the scene of that crime pristine for the authorities." He looked down his nose at the trembling woman.

"Meanwhile, no more chores for Mr Potter. He'll be much too busy getting ready for school. I do see the value of assigning responsibilities to children, but you clearly can't be trusted with any power over your nephew at all. I might suggest that your son do his share, but I wouldn't dream of usurping your parental authority. You're doing just fine destroying your son's life by yourself."

She began to sob, now, and Snape felt some mean satisfaction. Of course, it was perfectly clear to him that she was not sobbing out of shame or remorse, but because she was angry and helpless, and felt terribly hard-done-by, not being able to torment her nephew as she liked. Snape felt something else needed to be said, but first—

"Mr Potter, would you wait outside for me a moment? I have something else to say to your aunt, and it's not for your ears."

Green eyes wide, Harry left the house, closing the door softly. Snape suspected that he was doing his damndest to eavesdrop. Snape certainly would have, in his place.

Snape caught Petunia's upper arm in an iron grip. She yelped as he dragged her close--close enough that he could hiss in her ear, with no fear of Lily's impressionable child being shocked.

"The next time you need household help, you evil bitch, hire a maid!" He shoved her away, and she fell back, sprawling on the rug, her skirt riding up over knobby knees. "You're pathetic. If you'd been hit by a lorry, Lily would have treated Dudley as her own—"

Petunia scrambled to her feet, and swung a slap in his direction. She missed, and stumbled into him. He grabbed her arm again, just at the place he had already bruised. Petunia cried out in pain, and then shrilled a wild laugh.

"Still carrying the torch, are you? Oh, you and your Saint Lily! What a laugh! Lily wouldn't have let a mere muggle under her roof! None of her family were good enough for her after she went to your freak school! I didn't care—all you freaks deserve each other! I'm alive, and she's dead, for all her magic and her airs, and being so very special. I'm alive and she's dead! You're the one who's pathetic—pining after a girl who only put up with you out of pity! She dropped you quick smart when she got her claws into Potter—"

Snape threw her onto the couch, and drew his wand. She gasped with fright, and opened her mouth to scream.

Snape whispered, "If you scream, I will curse you. Do you understand? Nod. Good. If I ever hear you use the word "freak" again, I will curse you. If you or your husband or your son insult or injure Potter again, I will curse you." His glare blazed. "And if you ever say Lily's name again, I will fucking kill you. Are we clear about things now? Yes? All right, then. I'm off."

He strode to the door, and turned.

"But I'll be back."

Note: Look—Harry goes to school. Therefore he exists legally. Thus the Dursleys can claim a child's benefit for him. I can't believe they would pass that up.

Also--yes, Snape's first impression of Harry is entirely different than in canon. He sees Harry close to, and without his glasses. In canon, he sees him at a distance, and the dark hair and glasses would be the most notable features, thus heightening the resemblance to James Potter. Of course, Harry was also scowling at the moment from the pain caused by Quirrell. Snape probably took that as a sign of hostility toward himself.

Thank you to my reviewers. I appreciate the interesting points that many of you have raised!

Chapter 4

The boy was waiting for him. At the sight of Snape emerging from the Dursley residence the green eyes brightened, and Snape received a wide grin of greeting.

"You really let her have it! You must not be afraid of anything!"

Snape could not let pass such an opportunity to suppress embryo Gryffindorishness. "A wise man, Mr Potter, learns to gauge danger. Fear can be a useful tool and should not be dismissed. However, your aunt is only a muggle, and cannot possibly pose a threat to me."

"What's a muggle?" Harry squinted, taking in the new word.

"A person without magic—someone who is neither a witch nor a wizard nor a magical creature. Most of the human beings in the world are muggles. Britain's magical population is less than fourteen thousand."

The boy was listening intently, very eager to understand what Snape was saying. They walked companionably down the street, as Snape looked about him for a discreet apparition site.

There! At the end of the street there was a blind corner, sheltered by a wing wall. Unless someone was directly on the walk in front of them or driving past, they could not be seen.

"Step over here a moment, Mr Potter." He gestured to the spot. "It took me some time to find you, but now that I have been here once, I shall always be able to come and go by magical means. We are going to apparate to Diagon Alley, and we don't want muggles to see."

The boy did not hesitate to obey him. Snape was quite gratified. He had expected the boy to be arrogant and willful, but Snape now understood that this Potter could not be his father—not the rich, adored James Potter, his parents' long-awaited only child. This boy had been a pupil in the hard school of life—as had Snape. Potter might indeed be hesitant to trust adults, considering his guardians,

but their strange meeting had dispelled what suspicions the boy might have about authority figures—or at least about Snape personally.

They stepped into the shadows. Snape glanced at Harry and then frowned. He did not want the boy to be a laughingstock, nor did he wish to be seen with a laughingstock trailing after him. It was too much like his own past.

"Mr Potter, before we go, I think I must do something about your clothing." Snape was quite good at charming clothes to fit properly. Those charms had been among the first he had learned, when he could no longer bear his housemates' mockery. In very short order, the blue sweatshirt was shrunk to fit Harry's thin body. Snape noticed the belt holding up the enormous slacks.

"Remove the belt, Mr Potter. It would not do to reduce its size when it is wrapped around you twice. It might squeeze you in two."

"Eww," Harry muttered, quickly unbuckling and removing the worn strip of leather.

Snape adjusted the slacks, taking care of the details that mattered. The baggy knees and stubborn stains were spot-charmed away. Snape had Harry hold up the belt, while he carefully measured Harry's waist with his eyes. The leather of the belt was polished a fresh brown with a shoe-shining charm. When Snape had finished, the boy looked, if not well-dressed, at least neat. Finally, Snape cast a "Scourgify" at the rotten trainers.

"There's nothing more I can do about the shoes, I'm afraid. Shoes are a tricky business. Much better for you to buy new ones."

"But sir!" the boy protested softly. "I haven't any money yet! Don't we need to wait until Uncle Vernon gives you that government money?"

"No more questions now," Snape answered impatiently, eager to be gone. "I must hold fast to you while we apparate, Mr Potter. This may be unpleasant."

"What's does 'apparate' mean?---Whooooaaa!"

The familiar compression, the moment of utter oblivion, and then Diagon Alley was all about them. The boy beside him stumbled, and then nearly twisted his head off, trying to look in all directions. "Whoa!" Harry repeated, more softly. Then he watched, fascinated, while his new professor adjusted his own appearance.

First, what looked like a black handkerchief was pulled from a pocket of the tweed jacket. Quite suddenly, the handkerchief became a large buttoned garment, and it was slipped on, hiding the muggle clothing. Snape scowled at the sight of khaki showing under his robes, and spelled the slacks black temporarily. He would need them to be their normal color when he went back to Surrey. He noticed the boy grinning in delight, and gave him a nod.

"Welcome to Diagon Alley, Mr Potter."

He was very much his mother's son, Snape decided. The boy was a fountain of excited questions, but for all that, tried to be polite and not stare and point at sights that clearly amazed him.

"Where do we go first? Harry asked.

"To Gringotts, the wizarding bank," Snape answered, striding along confidently. "Your parents, as I told you before, left you provided for. We will use your money there for your school needs." Thinking a little more, he added, "Since your guardians do not seem to know about your inheritance, I think it would be wise if you said nothing about it, don't you?"

The boy nodded grimly. "Or Uncle Vernon would want to get at it."

"Precisely. It's none of their affair. If they ask you how you came by your things, you can tell them that there is a fund for poor students. The fund exists, so it is not a lie—" Too well did Snape know it existed—"but you need not tell them that you did not make use of said fund." He raised a brow, with a faint, conspiratorial smile.

Harry smirked, pleased at the idea.

The huge white building was before them. Snape whispered, "The bank is administered by the goblins. Very clever, very fierce, and very prone to take offense. Do not stare, and speak courteously."

The boy's eyes were very wide as they passed the goblin guard in his scarlet and gold. He nodded back when the goblin bowed. Once inside the bronze doors, they approached the silver inner doors, and Snape heard the boy whispering the inscription under his breath--

"Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed..."

His eyes were huge. Snape remarked, "It's very secure. The goblins have a reputation to uphold." He bent down and murmured, "They have dragons guarding the lowest levels."

The boy's face lit with delight. "Real dragons?"

Snape nodded gravely in assent. Slowing his stride to allow the boy time to look, they passed down the long marble hall to the counter. A goblin looked up enquiringly.

"Good day to you," Snape said, "We are here to make a withdrawal from Mr Harry Potter's vault."

"You have his key, sir?"

"As you see." Snape presented the small golden key for the goblin's inspection.

There was a pause for scrutiny.

"That seems to be in order. I will have someone take you down to the vault. Griphook!"

Snape secretly enjoyed the whizzing, dizzy rides through Gringotts. He had not experienced one until he was given his position at

Hogwarts and actually had money. This ride, down, down, left, left, right, down, was far longer than anything he had previously experienced. It made sense. The Potter fortune was an old one, and the vault would be deep in the Gringotts caverns. The boy beside him, all innocent of his family history, was clearly having the time of his life. He twisted about eagerly.

"I never know—" the boy called out, "—what's the difference between a stalagmite and a stalactite?"

"Stalagmites on the bottom," Snape called back, remembering a muggle school lesson from long ago. "Stalactites hang from the roof. They hold 'tite" or they'd fall!"

A sweet boy's laugh, dissipating into the air rushing past them.

At length the cart stopped beside a small door in the passage wall. The goblin unlocked the door. Harry bounded from the cart, and Snape followed more slowly, trying to hide his anticipation. He'd always wanted to see this kind of treasure for himself.

Green smoke billowed out of the doorway. As it cleared Harry gasped in wonder. Snape caught the glint of gold, and waved the last of the smoke away, standing behind the boy.

"This is mine?" Harry breathed.

"Yes, sir," the goblin Griphook answered, rather indifferently. "Will you be wanting a bag, or did you bring your own?"

"A bag, please," Snape answered quietly, giving the boy a nudge. They entered the vault. It was a room of stone and metal, some twenty feet by twenty feet. The ceiling was not quite so high—perhaps no more than ten feet, Snape guessed. Inside were piles of gold, silver, and bronze.

"All mine!" Harry wondered. He grinned at Snape. "All the times the Dursleys complained about how much I cost them—I had all this buried deep under London!" He picked up a piece of gold, and fingered it curiously.

Snape looked at the coins. It was a decent sum—but—

He strode to the door and whispered urgently to the goblin. "Does Mr Potter have another vault?"

The goblin cocked his head. "This is the Potter vault. There is no other."

"I thought—perhaps—that this might be a trust vault, since Mr Potter is a minor." The goblin's expression was chilly and imperturbable. Snape tried again. "This is it?"

"This is the Potter vault. There is no other," the goblin replied stonily.

"I think Mr Potter will need a statement of his assets today."

"You can pick one up at the counter as you leave, sir. It will show today's withdrawal, as well."

"Excellent."

Thinking hard, Snape stepped back into the vault, where the boy was still playing with the shining coins. Teacher mode was best at the moment, as he struggled to contain his disappointment and confusion. "The gold ones are galleons," he lectured. "Seventeen silver sickles to a galleon, and twenty-nine bronze knuts to a sickle. The wizarding world can't do things the easy way, so don't expect decimal systems here!"

Meanwhile, his mind was in a whirl. This is it? The fabled Potter fortune? Where are the jewels, the magical artifacts, the weapons, the crystals, the property deeds? —the cupboards of family silver and the trunks of codices and scrolls and grimoires and family ledgers? He looked again at the piles of coins. A decent sum of money. It will get the boy through school very comfortably, but no farther. I know that James Potter boasted that he would never have to work for a living. Where the bloody hell is the rest of it?

He controlled his face, and gave the boy the bag and helped him fill it with plenty to buy his supplies and the few extras Snape thought important. If this really was everything, Mr Potter would need be taught to husband his resources carefully. Nonetheless, he would see that the boy made the most of this first, most memorable visit to Diagon Alley.

"That should do very well," he declared, straightening. "We shall obtain a statement of your holdings before we leave, Mr Potter. This money must last you through all seven years of Hogwarts."

Another wild cart ride. Snape smiled faintly at the boy's whoops of joy, still puzzling over the fallen fortunes of the House of Potter. Had that idiot James really gone through it all before he was killed? Wasn't there a manor house somewhere? He knew that Potter's parents had taken in Sirius Black when he was disowned. And then, too, Potter had told everyone about a summer home in the south of France and a hunting lodge in the Highlands. Lily and Potter had been living in some cottage in a place called Godric's Hollow at their deaths, but that had been a hiding place only. His face cleared. That must be it! There is a house—or houses-- somewhere, and the treasures are kept there. Dumbledore will know. Not wanting to spoil the boy's delight in his little windfall, he said nothing about it.

The statement was duly delivered, and Snape frowned over it, folded it carefully, and pocketed it. They would need to set aside a place for the boy to keep important papers. Perhaps in his trunk-- "Where have you been sending the statements?" Of course there were statements. Snape himself received one quarterly from Gringotts.

"They are sent to the Headmaster of Hogwarts," the goblin at the counter answered blandly. "Would Mr Potter prefer that they be sent to him directly?"

"No!" Harry whispered. "The Dursleys will see them!" He told the goblin. "Send them to Professor Snape, please. He can give them to me. It's safer."

The goblin queried Snape with a dubious look, but Snape nodded and led the boy away.

"Where to now?" Harry asked eagerly.

Snape had thought about it, and led him down the street, past Eeylops Owl Emporium, to a little door with a brightly colored sign hanging above it.

Iris Forsyte, Oculist

"I'm getting new glasses?"

"Don't you think it would be a good idea?" Snape asked silkily. "I'm sure you want to do well at Hogwarts. It could be an advantage to actually see."

The boy snorted, and smiled wryly.

The door opened on a narrow stairway. They ascended to a sunny room where a snowy-haired witch greeted them.

"Good day to you! I am Madam Forsyte. Professor Snape, I believe. And who is this?" She smiled down at Harry and saw the scar. She gasped.

Snape did not want a scene. "Mr Potter needs something better than muggle eyeglasses, Madam. I have heard that you are talented—and discreet."

"Of course!" Her smile softened, and she took them into a little examining room. "Let's see what you have, Mr Potter." She handled the much-mended glasses with trepidation and disgust, tutting to herself.

There followed a quarter-hour of meticulous testing. Harry found it was not much like the eye exam the school nurse at Little Whinging Primary had given him. He stared into colored crystals, and then three drops of a potion that Madam Forsyte discussed with Professor Snape were placed in each eye. He read different sized printing from cards, but then she also had him look at a picture of a unicorn in a forest. To his amazement, the unicorn moved, and Madam Forsyte

asked him questions about when he could see it best: first with his right eye, and then with his left. She took out her own wand (which was shorter than Professor Snape's) and did spells on him. Nothing hurt, and Harry found it possible to lie back quietly. It would be nice to have better glasses.

"I would like you to rest your eyes for five minutes, Harry," Madam Forsythe said. "I'm going to talk to Professor Snape in the next room. Please try to keep your eyes shut, because it will help me fit you better. If you fall asleep, that's fine."

Harry could not imagine sleeping when everything around him was so exciting, but he dutifully closed his eyes. In seconds, her unseen little charm had worked, and he was asleep. Snape followed the oculist out to the other room.

"He certainly needs something better than those!" she said, glancing scornfully at Harry's glasses. "Muggles must be very primitive if that's the best they can do!" She bit her lip. "I don't mean to offend, but part of his problem appears to be due to nutritional deficiencies. He needs supplements right away, or his eyes will deteriorate badly starting in his twenties."

"I shall see to it. He'll have a complete physical examination at Hogwarts. What kind of eyewear do you recommend?"

"He's been living with muggles?" the witch muttered angrily. "Who thought that a good idea?" Giving herself a little shake, she said, "I could actually reshape his eyes and improve his vision, but that would take a few years, and require that I fit him with lenses on the surface of his eye."

"What the muggles call 'contact lenses.'" Snape nodded.

The witch sniffed. "These are a great deal better than the muggle article. They'll last a year, so you'll need to bring him back next summer for another examination. You should let your mediwitch at school know that he's wearing them, in case he has an eye injury. They are fairly expensive, and so not everyone can afford them."

"How much?"

"Fifty galleons apiece."

"Done." Snape did not bother to haggle. They were medically necessary, first of all. If the boy's vision could be salvaged, it would be outrageous not to do so. The more he thought about it, the more he liked it. Without his glasses, Harry Potter did not look much like his father James, except for the unruly dark hair. Yes, all in all, it was an excellent idea.

They discussed the potion dosages in more detail, and returned to the examining room to wake Harry.

"Contact lenses?" the boy asked doubtfully. "Would I need a special case for them?"

When it was explained that the oculist would apply them and leave them in for a year he was more open to the idea. Snape told him, "I think it would be best, Mr Potter. These lenses will actually correct your vision, over time. Furthermore, your glasses make you vulnerable. With these contact lenses, however, you needn't worry about lost or broken glasses if you go flying." Or are in a duel, Snape thought to himself.

"Flying?" Harry asked, distracted.

"And you will see much better," the oculist added firmly.

Harry smiled nervously. "All right then. Does it take a long time?"

"Just a few minutes. You don't want any special colors, do you? Not with those green eyes of yours?"

"Certainly not," Snape answered. He did not want Lily's eyes to be hidden from him. "Clear lenses are far more practical."

Another quarter hour found them back in the Alley. Harry blinked a few times, a little bewildered by the clarity of the world before him. Then he turned to Snape.

"What was that about flying?"

Snape sighed, and resigned himself to a brief explanation of Quidditch, the wizarding passion for the game, and the use of brooms. They walked past Quality Quidditch supplies, and Harry craned to see over the heads of some red-haired older boys who were discussing an object called the "Nimbus Two Thousand." It did not look exactly like a broom to Harry, who had some acquaintance with them, but as they walked away, Snape assured him that wizards and witches were indeed able to fly on them.

"Could I go back and get one, sir?" Harry begged.

"On your letter it clearly states that first years are not allowed to bring broomsticks. However," Snape relented grudgingly, "you will all be given flying lessons. If you find you enjoy it, perhaps you can budget some money next year for a broomstick of your own. By that time you will know enough to choose wisely."

"That would be super!"

Snape pulled out Harry's supply list. "You need to make your purchases for school, not worry about Quidditch."

Harry read, "—Three sets of plain work robes—black—"

"Yes, let's get you dressed for the wizarding world," Snape agreed.

He took Harry to Madam Malkin's and told the proprietress curtly, "Hogwarts: full kit, and labels to be charmed later." No need for the witch and her shop assistants to start fawning on "Famous Harry Potter." To Harry, he said, "I'm going to the other side of the shop to pick up a few things for myself. When you are finished, wait here for me," he pointed at a bench, "until I return."

Harry was hurried to the back of the shop by the kindly, squat witch. "First year, dear? Don't worry—got the lot here—and another young man being fitted up just now, in fact."

He stood on a stool, letting the witch slip a black robe over his head and then start pinning it to fit. A gangling red-haired boy was beside him, grimacing.

"First year, too?"

"Yeah."

The boy looked at him doubtfully. "You're pretty small. Are you sure you're eleven?"

Harry tried to stand taller. "I'm eleven today."

"Oh. Well, then, happy birthday."

"Thanks."

They were quiet, as they turned and lifted their arms. Then the other boy said,

"Know which house you'll be in?"

Harry had no idea what he was talking about. "No, I don't."

"All my brothers have been in Gryffindor. I don't suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad, but imagine being in Slytherin. I'd just leave, wouldn't you?"

"Hmmm." Harry grunted, turning. He wanted Professor Snape to come back and tell him what the boy meant by "houses."

Another silence, and the boy asked, "Do you have your own broom?"

"No. I wish I did."

"Do you play Quidditch?"

"No."

Harry could see that the other boy's opinion of him had gone down considerably. "Well," said the redhead, condescendingly, "my brothers and I play Quidditch all the time at home. We have our own pitch. Charlie was Seeker for Gryffindor and the twins are Beaters on the house team now. I plan to try out myself—not this year, of course—" he added hastily, "--but someday."

"It sounds like fun. I heard they give us flying lessons."

"Yeah—I—" the boy's eyes widened and he said, "Look there! That's got to be the scariest man I've ever seen!"

Harry looked, and saw Professor Snape's head above a rack of dress robes. He was talking to an assistant, who was sorting through a pile of white linen. Snape saw Harry smiling at him, and acknowledged him with a nod. Harry told the boy, "That's Professor Snape. He teaches at Hogwarts."

"I've heard of him!" The boy answered, horrified. "He's the head of Slytherin! Fred and George think he's a slimy, greasy git, and people say he's a dark wizard, and he used to be in league with You-Know-Who."

"I think he's brilliant," said Harry coldly. "He's helping me get my school things."

"Is he?" asked the boy, with a slight sneer. "Why is he with you? Where are your parents?"

"They're dead," said Harry shortly. He didn't feel much like going into the matter with this boy.

"Oh—sorry," said the other boy, a little embarrassed

Madam Malkin said to the redhead, "That's you done, my dear. Just the one new robe?"

The other boy hopped down, muttering. "Yeah, mum's fixing up some of my brothers' for me." He looked back at Harry.

"Reckon I'll see you at Hogwarts, then."

Harry nodded, and fidgeted impatiently while the witch finished. He was astonished at how fast his clothing was ready, and by the time it was all finished and paid for, he had a huge, soft bundle waiting on the bench beside him. Just as he was wondering how he would carry everything, Professor Snape appeared and shrank the bundle down to toy size.

He put it in a pocket, and said to Harry, "Now let's see to your books."

As they walked together, Snape noticed the boy's happy expression had clouded. He had seen the gingery hair of the other boy and presumed that Harry had met the newest Weasley to go to Hogwarts. What had the Weasley boy said to him?

"Professor Snape?"

"Yes, Mr Potter?"

"What do they mean by 'houses'?"

The Best Revenge

Author's note: The heavy pressure of work and the demands of family (I am executor for the estate of my deceased brother and his wife) make it very difficult to respond to every review. I am very sorry, and hope the situation will ease. I do appreciate your interest. Since some of you have raised the same questions, I will try to answer a few of them here:

Is this a "bash-Dumbledore-the-thief" story?

While I enjoy a good Dumbledore bash as much or more than anyone, I am trying for something different here. This is, after all, an alternate universe. I also wanted to write something different than the many super-rich Harry stories. While the books don't really answer the questions that Harry's assets or lack of them raise, I felt an explanation might be possible. My Dumbledore is not an evil person: however, his eye is always on the big picture, and he is so old that everyone else seems like a child to him, which is why he never tells people anything more than he thinks their tiny minds can handle.

Will Harry be in Slytherin?

I love Slytherin! Harry stories. There are a number of excellent ones out there. However, once again I am trying to do something a little fresh with the theme. The essential reason that Harry might have done well in Slytherin, I think, was due to the horcrux (It's all in your head!). If the Hat discounts that extraneous influence, it might choose differently for Harry, whose views and needs might change if his month prior to school is different than the one presented in canon.

Will you continue the story through all seven years?

That's a very interesting question. After thinking for months about things I disliked in canon, I have accepted that JKR is a professional writer—a professional writer—who had a seven book contract. In order to fulfill that contract and earn money, she had to create situations that would draw the story out and make each adventure last a full school year. To do this, she required characters who did not communicate very effectively—or at all. She also required absurdities

like the whole premise of Goblet of Fire. However, my Harry now has a mentor whom he will trust, who is intelligent and has a broad knowledge of the Dark Arts. He will talk to him, and vice versa. Minerva McGonagall will also be more personally interested in Harry and consider his best interests. As I am not writing this fanfiction in any hope of remuneration, there is no financial incentive for me to create misunderstandings. We all know that Quirrell is possessed by Voldemort, and so there is no possible mystery for me to develop here—only the question of what are they all going to do about it! I do not have to make the mystery last an entire school year to fill a book, so events may transpire very differently and more quickly than in canon. This is not meant as a JKR-bash. She is a professional writer, and has successfully made a great fortune. Her choices were reasonable ones, given her aims, though I still deplore the direction the story took in HBP and DH. Dickens padded his novels, too.

As to canon, since this is an alternative universe, I feel free to alter certain details (you will notice this especially in Harry's first meeting with Quirrell). Generally, this is because I don't like that canon detail and don't think it makes sense. In a similar vein, I am only admitting to Hogwarts the first years who are actually presented in canon—not the ones from Rowling's well-known notes. Therefore, the class is smaller, and there is no Su-Li or Tracy Davis or Kevin Entwhistle, for example. If JKR didn't put them in the books, they don't exist. My only exception is "Moon" who is mentioned at the Sorting, but who has no first name, gender, or house. I am not using this individual. I like the smaller enrollment, since I've wondered how the teaching staff, as presented, manage all the classes. It might be marginally possible, but the teaching loads are pretty heavy. Anyway—on to the story!

Chapter 5

Snape grimaced at the boy's question. He wanted to tell the boy about Hogwarts in his own way, without the boy being given notions by someone else.

"Do you mean "houses" at Hogwarts?" Snape asked Harry.

"Yes, sir. That boy at the clothing shop said that his brothers were in Gryff—Gryff—"

"Gryffindor," Snape pronounced impatiently. "All Hogwarts is divided into four houses. The houses each have dormitories and a Common Room. Your house is your family while you are at school. The houses are Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor."

"My letter didn't say which house I should go to, sir."

"That is decided when you arrive at Hogwarts," Snape said, trying not to be annoyed at the subject. It was a reasonable enough question. "Here is the bookstore. We will purchase your supplies first, Mr Potter, and then have dinner. I promise to answer your questions then."

"OK." Harry hoped he would find out what a "dark wizard" was, too. It sounded kind of neat.

On hearing that Harry was a first year, the clerk at Flourish and Blotts presented him with a stack of books. Harry wanted to look around, and Snape was inclined to indulge him a little. It was a disgrace that the boy had never been encouraged to read at home.

Harry was soon excitedly studying Curses and Counter-curses by Vindictus Viridian. "I'm trying to find out how to curse Dudley."

"Understandable, but you are not allowed to use magic out of school while you are underage, unless in very special circumstances. I will deal with the Dursleys myself. On the other hand, the book is really not a bad introduction to dueling spells. Buy it if you like, but read through your assigned texts first."

He left Harry to pay for the books, and sought out three more books that might be of use to a boy who had only today discovered he was a wizard. He bit his lip, undecided, and then paid for them himself. He spotted Harry and presented the books to him: *So You've Found Out Magic Is Real!* by Charity Burbage; *Hogwarts, A History*; and *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

Tapping the cover of the first book, he said, "Read this before anything else. It explains a great many things that students raised

among wizards take for granted. This will tell you about wizarding customs, social rankings, how your magical education prepares you for jobs in the magical world, and also how the Ministry of Magic operates."

"There's a Ministry of Magic?" Harry asked, surprised.

"There is indeed. It is our government, and it would be wise to know our laws, especially those that pertain to dealings with muggles."

"What are these others, then?"

"The first will tell you about the school which will be your home for the next seven years. Hogwarts is a thousand years old. You can imagine how much lore has accrued over the centuries. As to the last--you might call it a book of fairytales, but they are stories known to every wizarding child in Britain. They'll give you a bit of light reading, and also help you understand your fellow students' background."

"It'll be great to have books of my own. I've only got *Wind in the Willows* and *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* now."

"Well, these are yours. You can take them home and commit them to memory, if you like, and no one can ever take your education from you."

Harry looked briefly depressed. "I'll try. I want to do well, but everybody's bound to know more than me." He looked at the floor and muttered, "I bet I'm the worst in the class."

"Unlikely," Snape told him quietly. "Your mother was one of the top students of her year—remarkably talented both in Charms and in Potions--and she grew up in a muggle family, too. The old wizarding families may talk all they like, but I've never noticed that children from their families do significantly better than the muggleborn—or the halfbloods."

Seeing that Harry was puzzled by these terms, he said briskly, "I'll explain about that later. For now, it is enough for you to know that

how well you do in school lies entirely with you. If you study your books and apply yourself, I am certain you will be worthy of your mother."

"I'd better pay for these now, sir."

Snape said stiffly, "I have already paid for them. You may consider them a birthday present."

"Thank you sir!" The boy seemed astounded that anyone would give him a present. It was depressing, but considering Petunia, it was entirely possible that birthday presents were something that only "darling Dudders" received. "I promise I'll study them really hard!"

"Then that will be all the thanks I require," Snape acknowledged. He shrank the books and put them away.

"Was my father a good student, too?" Harry asked as they stepped out of the store.

"He was—" Snape considered what to say. Faint praise might be better than an outright attack. "He was not as outstanding as your mother, but he had some talents of his own. He was a good student of Transfiguration, and a good quidditch player. In time, you will discover your own particular strengths as a wizard."

"What did you like best in school, sir?"

"I was very interested in Defense Against the Dark Arts and in Potions. I am currently the Potions Master at Hogwarts."

"Hmmm," Harry considered. "What sorts of things can you do with potions?"

Snape burst out passionately, "You can do everything with potions! They are the subtlest, the most versatile, the most comprehensive of all the magical arts! Come now, here's MacMillan's Magical Supplies. You need a cauldron—"

"To make potions in?"

"What else?"

Once in the amazing shop, Harry gazed admiringly at a solid gold cauldron. Snape rolled his eyes, and declared, "Pewter, Mr Potter. You will need years of training before you make the sorts of potions that require a gold cauldron." The proper cauldron was selected, along with a nice set of scales that Harry clearly found intriguing and the necessary vials. The standard-size collapsible telescope completed their purchases there, and then it was on to the apothecary, an old acquaintance of Snape's, who gave Harry a special price on his best-quality ingredients, as a favor to the Professor. Harry hung back, staring at silvery unicorn horns.

"Come," Snape gestured, "we still have much to do."

"Are those real, sir?" Harry asked. "They have amazing stuff here!"

Snape's impatience softened slightly. "They do indeed," he agreed, with a parting nod to the apothecary. "Very likely we shall be returning to Diagon Alley at least once before school begins, and you can spend more time examining his stock then."

"I'd like that." Harry told him.

Snape allowed himself a smug little smile. "Here is the shoemaker. You should order something decent to wear with your uniform."

Harry was measured by a harried shop assistant. He was informed that they were extremely busy, but that a pair of black ankle boots—the last word in fashion for the discerning young wizard—would be ready in a week. They would be water-proof and scuff-proof, and could expand magically somewhat to fit his growing feet. And they would be made with beautifully patterned chupacabra leather, especially imported from Central America.

"Not cheap," Snape told Harry when they left the shop, "but an extremely good investment."

"I don't suppose I can wear them when I'm not with wizards and witches, though," Harry said. Rather wistfully, he remarked, "Maybe if Uncle Vernon gives you that other money, I could buy a new pair of trainers. I'd like to have a new pair of those when I'm at home."

"New muggle clothes and shoes would certainly be wise purchases," Snape agreed. "We can do that another day."

Harry looked up quickly, immeasurably reassured by the fact that Professor Snape was talking about return visits. So much of this seemed like a dream that Harry feared he would wake up and find himself in his cupboard again.

Another small shop, the stationer's, was next, where Snape helped Harry choose notebooks and a ream of parchment. The shop smelled of dust and ink. Snape informed Harry that he should purchase a good supply of black ink, as well as plenty of quills.

"We write with quills?" Harry asked anxiously. "I don't know how to do that. Why don't we just use biros?"

"Tradition, I'm afraid," Snape shrugged. "You'll need a penknife, too—one of those over there—yes, the little ones. You'll need to learn how to trim your quills." Seeing the boy utterly at a loss, he told him, "I'll show you how. You have an entire month before school begins. Your mother was worried about the quills, too, but she picked it up fairly quickly. There is a trick to writing with a quill. Here." He added a little calligraphy pamphlet to Harry's purchases. "To help you learn how to make your letters with a quill. And here. A planner. Your mother always used one. It will help you keep track of classes and assignments."

The boy was studying the planner like an explorer discovering a new world. Snape observed, "I daresay you found it rather difficult to do homework in a cupboard. We'll make certain you have a desk in your new room. Sometimes there are homework assignments to be done over the summer."

"I'd like to have a desk." Harry smiled. "I could draw there and everything! Aunt Petunia always had Dudley use the kitchen table

when they did his homework, but I wasn't allowed. A desk of my own is better, anyway." He glanced at the pamphlet. "My handwriting is awful. I guess it wouldn't hurt to start over again on that. It's sort of like drawing, too."

"It is, rather. Good handwriting will make life easier for you at school." And it will make life infinitely easier for your teachers, he forbore to say aloud. "Now," he muttered, half to himself, "All that remains is the wand."

He led the boy back down the street. As they passed Eeylops Owl Emporium, Harry paused, watching a beautiful snowy owl flutter to the shop window. It perched and looked out at him, holding the boy's green eyes with her yellow ones.

"She's gorgeous," Harry breathed.

"Yes, very nice, Mr Potter," Snape said, hardly paying attention, "Owls are useful creatures." He realized that Harry was still standing in front of the window, and retraced his steps to collect his charge. "But we really haven't time to shop for pets today. Perhaps when we come for your shoes we can see if there is a creature you fancy. It might be best if your new room were prepared to receive a pet first."

"Good idea," Harry agreed, turning his head to see the owl as long as possible. "It says on the letter that I can have an owl."

"Or a cat or a toad." Snape thought it a bit absurd for the boy to waste his money on an owl, but he had had so few pleasures in his life..."Ah—here is Ollivander's. He's an outstanding craftsman. Come along, come along,"

They stepped from the bustle of the Alley into the solemn silence of the wand shop. Snape shut his eyes, letting the scent of polished wood, of citrus oil, of dust and time and magic bring back to him that long-ago day when he stood here in the boy's place.

"Severus can go first!" Lily told her mother, trying to be polite. She whirled, bright hair snapping, nearly dancing with excitement, shiny black shoes tapping a light rhythm as she paced restlessly.

Mrs Evans was bewildered by Diagon Alley, but in the end, she had been forced to go. Mum had promised to take him and Lily, but had put them off for nearly two weeks with one excuse or another. She was feeling poorly, she was too busy, she needed more time to get the money together. Finally Mrs Evans had come to the house with Lily one morning, and told Mum that they were going today, and wouldn't she like to come along? Mum had stared at them, and then gone to the kitchen and taken a hidden roll of bills from a flour sack.

"Here." she said curtly, thrusting them into Mrs Evans' hand. White powder sifted down onto the floor. "You! Severus! Go along with Mrs Evans now, and see that you mind her. You want to be a wizard? Here's your chance!" She turned her back on them, walking away, back to the kitchen table. She slumped into a chair, head in her hands. Under her breath, she muttered, "We'll see how you like it."

Severus knew that Mrs Evans was doing her best for him, stretching his bit of money as far as it would go, adding some of her own when she thought he wouldn't notice. He did notice it, but he swallowed his pride and feigned ignorance. He had to have enough left for a good wand, even if his cauldron and his scales and some of his books had been Mum's first.

"No!" he whispered, in awe of the shop piled high with oblong brown boxes. Somehow they made him think of coffins. "No," he repeated, a little frightened. "Ladies first. I know that."

"That's very nice of you," Mrs Evans praised him, pretending that she wasn't rather frightened herself. The sudden appearance of the silver-eyed old wizard did not seem to do much to reassure her.

But Lily was not frightened. She stepped forward boldly to meet Mr Ollivander, and laughed a bright, friendly laugh as she was measured and questioned and tested. In due course, there was a fountain of golden sparks, and Lily was the possessor of her own swishy willow wand.

"A nice wand for Charms work," Mr Ollivander informed Mrs Evans. "I wouldn't be surprised if your daughter showed considerable talent for the subject."

"Charms. How nice," Mrs Evans ventured weakly. Snape caught Lily's eye, and they shared a secret grin. Mrs Evans didn't understand anything about magic. She thought Charms were something for young ladies to learn in finishing school.

And then—"Severus Snape. It seems only yesterday that I was selling a wand to young Eileen Prince. Ten inches, cypress..."

It took quite a time to find the right wand. Snape felt like sinking through the floor, terrified that Mr Ollivander would find nothing suitable for the son of a muggle and a witch who had turned her back on her family. Mrs Evans was kind to bring him here, but her patience was starting to show, and Lily was wild for some ice cream—

"Severus Snape," whispered a reedy old man's voice, "twelve inches, the last of my special ash tree, heartstrings of a particularly nasty Hungarian Horntail. A strong wand, good for dueling. It is still satisfactory, I hope?"

"Entirely," Snape answered, returning to the present. "I am assisting a new student today."

Mr Ollivander came forward, full of wonder.

"Harry Potter!" he declared. "I thought I'd be seeing you soon." He stepped forward into the late afternoon light, studying the boy before him. "You have your mother's eyes."

"I do?" Harry was surprised. No one had ever told him he resembled either of his parents, other than in being a worthless freak. He glanced up at Snape for confirmation. Snape responded with a tight grimace that served as a smile.

"Yes. Your mother had green eyes."

Lost in thought, Snape paid little attention to the old man's description of Lily's wand, and then of James Potter's wand. Snape had known them both well enough, and briefly wondered what had become of them. He looked up suddenly, seeing that Ollivander had brushed the boy's hair aside and was touching the lightning-bolt scar.

..."I'm sorry to say I sold that wand that did it," Ollivander was saying. "Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yes. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands...well, if I'd known what that wand was going out into the world to do..."

Snape saw the boy's alarmed expression and interrupted. "A wand for Mr Potter? So we can see what he can do?"

"Yes, of course. Let me see."

Snape watched the measurements with a cynical eye, wondering how much was simply showmanship to impress the children. A long succession of wands was attempted, but Ollivander snatched them back almost as fast as he put them in Potter's hands. It was taking quite some time, and Snape could see the boy was getting tired.

Probably hungry, too, he thought. He might not have had lunch. Or breakfast. I've got to get the boy some dinner before he faints from hunger. Not the Leaky Cauldron, though. Not yet.

Ollivander, however, was energized by the challenge. At length he muttered, "Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere—I wonder, now—yes, why not—unusual combination—holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

No sooner had the boy taken the wand in his hand than a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the tip. Light danced on the shadowed walls. The boy's face filled with delight. He grinned at Snape triumphantly.

"Didn't I tell you that you were a wizard, Mr Potter?" Snape inquired archly. Red and gold. A hint of a sorting into Gryffindor? Or is it simply a manifestation of the phoenix core?

Ollivander was watching the boy with a wide, pale stare. "Oh, bravo! Yes, indeed, oh, very good. Well, well, well...how curious...how very curious..."

Impatiently, Snape bit out, "What is curious?"

"Ah, Professor Snape. I remember every wand I've ever sold. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in Mr Potter's wand, gave another feather--just one other. It is very curious indeed that he should be destined for this wand when its brother—why, its brother gave him that scar."

"My scar?" Harry burst out. "I don't understand—"

Snape hissed at Ollivander, "You are worrying the boy, Ollivander. What brother?"

Ollivander's memories were far away. "Yes, thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember...I think we must expect great things from you, Mr Potter...After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things—terrible, yes—but great."

"Thank you so much," Snape grunted, wanting the boy out of the shop instantly. "How much?"

The seven galleons were counted out, and Snape hustled his charge away with a light push. Under his hand he could feel the boy's thin back, the bones light as a bird's. Snape fancied he could feel a shiver. Once out in the sunlight, he found he could make himself sound reassuring.

"I think a hearty dinner would do us both good. Don't worry about Ollivander's Delphic ravings. I'll explain that bit of theatre when you have some food in front of you."

Chapter 6

In the end, Snape decided that they would have dinner in the muggle world, where they were unlikely to be recognized and interrupted. He doffed his robe and tucked it away, returned his slacks to their proper color, and saw that the shrunken purchases were secured in a nondescript bag. There was a pleasant place in Bloomsbury he knew, and at only a few minutes past six, they were at the restaurant, being shown to a table.

Snape noticed the boy handling the menu rather gingerly, and realized that he might never have been allowed to choose a meal before. "Have what you like, Mr Potter." Seeing the boy's continuing hesitation, Snape told him, "My treat."

"Thank you, sir!" The boy was favoring him with a grateful smile. Snape felt rather nervous, since such expressions were not often directed at him. A pretty young woman came to take their order, making the boy blush.

Snape asked, "Well, what do you want?"

"Oh—I'll have whatever you're having." The boy said it quickly, trying to be nonchalant.

With a smirk, Snape observed, "It's fortunate for you, perhaps, that I'm not in the mood for pig's trotters tonight. The cottage pie here is always good. I'll have that," he said to the girl.

"I like cottage pie," Harry said, eyes shining.

"Cottage pie for both of us," Snape said decisively. "A lager for me and milk for the boy. We'll order our desserts later." Sure enough, the boy's grin grew even broader. "It's your birthday, after all."

"Is it your birthday, love?" cooed the waitress. "How old are you, then?"

"Eleven today," Harry told her proudly.

"Well, a happy birthday to you!" she smiled back.

When she had gone her way, Snape took a deep breath. "I promised to tell you what you want to know, Mr Potter, but first I must ask you this: has your aunt ever told you what happened to your parents?"

Harry studied the worn wooden table. "Just that they were blown up in a car crash, and that they were free—"

"Don't say it!"

"—they were like me," the boy said softly.

Snape scowled. "First of all, you must always remember that your aunt is a liar. Never believe anything she says. Don't forget that, but do forget anything that she might ever have said about your parents. Your aunt was horribly jealous of your mother when they were girls. She was jealous because your mother was smarter and prettier—and because she was a witch. Apparently Petunia has never gotten over her disappointment at not being invited to Hogwarts, and so she takes it out on you."

"Aunt Petunia wanted to go to Hogwarts?" Harry was amazed.

Snape sneered. "I know for a fact that she wrote a letter to the Headmaster, begging him to admit her. He refused, of course—kindly—but it was still a refusal, and Petunia was devastated. Perhaps that is why she tries so hard to pretend to be perfectly normal now—to compensate for how much she longed for magic when she was a girl."

"I suppose I should be sorry for her," Harry reflected. There was a questioning tone in the words.

"Don't waste your pity on her. She certainly has shown you none. Anyway, Petunia is a liar and your parents certainly were not killed in a 'car crash.' I'm not sure that James Potter was ever inside a muggle motor vehicle, and I'm certain he wouldn't have had a clue how to drive one. The Potters are an old wizarding family, and James Potter grew up as a wizard among wizards. He met your mother at

Hogwarts and they were married shortly after they finished school." He took a deep breath, preparing for the harder part of the story. "When we were in school, there was trouble in the wizarding world. A very powerful, very evil wizard had gathered some followers and wanted to force his ideas on everybody else. He used terror and violence to frighten people."

"Were my Mum and Dad afraid of him?"

"They would have been fools not to be!" Snape shot back, more sharply than he meant to. "When we were at the wand shop, Ollivander talked about 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named.' Others called him The Dark Lord. Even saying his real name could attract his attention."

"What was his name?" Harry asked, full of curiosity.

"I'll say it once, Mr Potter, and never again. Don't ask it of me. He called himself Voldemort. Lord Voldemort."

"Voldemort," Harry repeated softly.

"Don't make a habit of saying it. It brings back too much. He was truly terrible—certainly Ollivander is right about that. The Ministry was nearly helpless against him. The Dark Lord struck where he pleased. Only Hogwarts was safe, where Albus Dumbledore was—and is—Headmaster. Your mother and father would never have followed The Dark Lord, and on Halloween night, ten years ago, he hunted them down."

He paused, feeling ill. The waitress came, bringing them their drinks.

"Drink your milk," Snape ordered quietly. Harry nodded and began to sip at it.

"It's good," he murmured. "I don't get milk very often."

"I'm going to see about some nutrient supplements for you. You've been on short rations too long." Snape took a long swallow of lager, and went on with the story. "All this must be horrible for you to hear. I

assure you it's distressing to tell you. The Dark Lord tried to kill you too, after he had attacked your parents. But something went wrong." He gave a bitter half-smile, and took another drink.

"You would think, with all the times he had used the Killing Curse, that he would have perfected it, but something happened. No one is sure quite what, but it appears that somehow the curse rebounded. It hurt you, of course, and left your unusual scar, but it destroyed the caster."

"So he's gone." Harry said, thinking about it. He looked up and narrowed his eyes. "He is gone, isn't he?"

"Good God, I hope so," Snape said feelingly. "He lost his physical form, at the very least. Perhaps his powers, too. No one found a trace of him. There was a flash of light—"

Harry gasped, "The green light! And a laugh!"

Snape stopped and stared. "How can you possibly remember?"

"I don't know. I just did. I think I've dreamed about the green light sometimes. And a kind of high, cruel laugh."

"The Killing Curse shines green. However," Snape said, more briskly, "there was an explosion that destroyed part of the cottage. His body was never found. Perhaps he was no longer human enough to die—he had undergone unspeakable rituals in his attempt to make himself invulnerable and immortal. In vain, it would seem. If he were able to come back, I'm sure he would."

"What did Mr Ollivander mean about my wand being the brother to that evil wizard's wand? How can a wand have a brother?"

"Ollivander simply meant that your wands share a very similar core. It's nothing for you to worry about. Ollivander told you he only uses unicorn hairs, dragon heartstrings, and phoenix feathers for cores, so many wands have similar cores anyway. In your case—and the Dark Lord's—well—your wand cores come from the same phoenix. And

after all, that is not so surprising, since phoenixes are rare birds indeed."

"So you don't think there's anything bad about my wand?" Harry prompted him anxiously.

"Certainly not. Phoenixes are noble creatures. Any evil done by the Dark Lord's wand came from the Dark Lord himself. You have a splendid wand, and I have no doubt it will serve you well. Ollivander is such an old drama queen."

Harry giggled, and gulped down more milk.

The girl came with their food: cottage pie done properly, rich with meaty gravy and the mashed potatoes on top delicately browned. A basket of breadrolls was set temptingly near to Harry, along with all the butter he could possibly want. The girl smiled at Harry, who was too nice a boy not to smile back, despite having just heard the story of his parents' deaths.

"At any rate, that's what happened," Snape told him, beginning on the potatoes. "You were found in the wreckage and taken to your only relatives. The Dark Lord was gone. Some of his followers went to prison, and some awoke from the spells he had used to bind them. There was celebration all around, except for those of us who--thought the price very high."

"I wish he had started on me first," Harry said after swallowing a bit of beef. "He would have been blown up and my parents would have lived."

"Who can say? You should know, Mr Potter, that what happened made you very famous in the wizarding world. People speak of you as 'The Boy-Who-Lived.'"

"I'm famous?"

"Indeed you are."

"I don't see why," Harry grumbled. "It's not like I did anything. More likely it was my Mum or Dad who did something to protect me, or Voldemort—"

Snape hissed in acute discomfort.

"—Sorry—that evil dark lord who messed up. Why should I be famous? I was just a baby!"

"I agree that it's unlikely that you were the one responsible. Nonetheless, you survived, and since no one else has ever survived the Killing Curse, it impressed many people."

"Whatever," the boy muttered, digging into his dinner. "This is really good, sir."

"It is, isn't it?"

They ate, and talked, and ate. Harry managed to finish every bit of his cottage pie, and he enjoyed his breadrolls, lavished with lashings of butter. Snape ordered him another milk.

He was saying, "You'll find the wizarding world both like and unlike the muggle one. There is magic, but people are still people. Witches and wizards can do amazing things, but there is still stupidity and snobbery, and cleverness and kindness. There are all sorts of ideas and customs that will seem strange to you, which is why I bought Professor Burbage's book for you."

"Do you know her?"

"She teaches Muggle Studies at Hogwarts. I doubt that you will take the class. It is intended for those who know nothing but the wizarding world."

"I wish there was a class for people like me."

"Well, History is supposed to take care of that, but unfortunately—" Snape snorted. "Unfortunately, the teacher is a very dull ghost—"

"A real ghost?"

"A real ghost. He simply never stopped teaching. I've often wondered if he was as dull when he was alive. A course in the wizarding world has been proposed from time to time—" Snape did not think it was the right moment to explain why Dumbledore rejected Lucius Malfoy's annual suggestion. "—but nothing has come of it. Thus the book. Still, there are things I can tell you that would have been too controversial for print. Just as there are social classes in the muggle world, there are different groups in our small wizarding world. There are purebloods, witches and wizards who are descended from other witches and wizards. They consider themselves the wizarding elite. Not everyone agrees. There are halfbloods, who have a magical parent and a parent of muggle extraction. And then there are the muggleborn, whose parents are muggles, and who have no immediate wizarding ancestors. You will find that some people in the wizarding world set a great store by blood and ancestry."

"Am I a pureblood?"

"No. It sounds odd, but you are technically considered a halfblood, since your mother was muggleborn."

"That doesn't make any sense. She was a witch."

"I don't make society's rules, Mr Potter. A pureblood's grandparents must all be witches and wizards. There is a certain degree of prejudice against the muggleborn. Your mother was sometimes annoyed by rude remarks when she was at school." Snape fidgeted a little, remembering one instance all too well.

"Why don't they like muggleborns?"

Snape grimaced. "It's complicated. Some of it is ignorance. Some of the most vocal muggle-haters have never actually met a muggle. Some of it is offended pride when the muggleborn don't bother to learn our customs and traditions—another reason I want you to read

the book I gave you. On the other hand, there is a genuine fear of the muggle world in some quarters. We keep ourselves secret, for we must never forget the terrible time of the witch hunts. There are still plenty of muggles who would cause us harm if they knew we existed. Or they would try to enslave us, and harness our magic for their own purposes. I myself think that we are better off keeping ourselves unknown and separate from the muggles. Since the muggleborn have muggle relatives, there is concern that our security could be compromised by careless gossip."

Harry nodded. "If Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon thought that anyone would believe them, I'll bet they'd tell. Except that they'd be embarrassed."

"Is your Uncle Vernon any more reasonable than Petunia?"

Harry raised surprised eyebrows at him.

Snape cleared his throat. "I take it that your expression means that 'reasonable' and 'Uncle Vernon' should not be mentioned in the same breath."

"He hates me," Harry said with perfect conviction. "And he can yell a lot louder than Aunt Petunia."

"Does he ever hit you?"

"Not much. I think," said Harry, frowning at the thought, "I think he's afraid to. Not because he's afraid of me, mind you, but maybe he's afraid he'd kill me if he ever let himself go. And then he'd be in trouble. He likes it when Dudley hits me, though."

Snape scowled, and finished his lager. The waitress was coming to clear the table. Harry shifted uncomfortably.

"Sir, I have to go. I mean—" he jerked his head in the direction of the loo.

Snape waved him away.

The waitress smiled on Snape now. "Your son is such a sweet lad."

"Ah—hmm—he's—" Snape was confused, yet strangely triumphant. I hope you heard that, James Potter!

"We have a lovely chocolate tart. Do you think he'd fancy a bit for his birthday? I can put a candle on it and all."

"Thank you. That would be very nice."

Harry was enchanted by his elaborately decorated slice of cake, and even more by the single candle shining just for him. This had been the best day he could remember, hands down. If only they didn't have to go back to Privet Drive...

"You were going to tell me about the houses, sir," he reminded Snape.

"Yes." Snape was enjoying the tart himself. He consumed chocolate only infrequently, but now and then there was nothing quite like it...

"The houses of Hogwarts are an old tradition, handed down by our Founders: Salazar Slytherin, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Godric Gryffindor. They built Hogwarts for the purpose of protecting and educating the young witches and wizards of Britain. Each founder prized certain traits in their students, and those traits today are the basis of how you are sorted into your houses."

"What traits?"

"Well—Gryffindor prized courage above all else, and today Gryffindor students are conspicuous for bravery. Rowena Ravenclaw was a scholar, and her favorite students were the most studious and intellectual. Helga Hufflepuff respected hard work and loyalty, and those are the trademark Hufflepuff virtues. And Slytherin—well, Salazar Slytherin was proud of his students' ambitions, and encouraged them to use their wits to achieve their goals."

"So Slytherins are ambitious?"

"Certainly."

"That boy in the shop made it sound like Slytherins were horrible. He said he'd just leave if he had to be a Slytherin."

"Did he indeed? He can leave and welcome, if he doesn't value ambition. Without a drive to achieve, there would be no new discoveries; life would be static; nothing would be accomplished. Many Heads of Department in the Ministry are Slytherins." Conscious that he was not being completely forthcoming, and that it could come back to haunt him, he added, "To be honest, however, there is another Slytherin tradition. Since Salazar Slytherin was unsure of the wisdom of admitting the muggleborn to Hogwarts, generally only purebloods and halfbloods are sorted into the house."

"So some of them are snobs?"

Biting down his first reply, Snape managed a more measured answer. "There are all sorts of snobbery, Mr Potter. I must admit that the evil wizard I told you of was in Slytherin himself. That certainly does not mean that every Slytherin is an evil witch or wizard, or that evil witches and wizards have never come from the other houses. The boy to whom you were speaking comes from a long line of Gryffindors, and there is a long-standing rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin. You agree that ambition can be a good thing?"

"Sure."

"As do I. However, all the house traits can be good or bad, depending on how one uses them. Ambition to achieve can be good, but one might have an ambition to be a successful criminal—or a Dark Lord. Loyalty is all very well, and society could not exist without it, but what if that loyalty is directed at an unworthy object? After all, many Germans were loyal to Adolf Hitler. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"Yes, sir."

"Diligent study can be good, but not if one wastes one's life studying something ugly or worthless. And courage—" he paused, remembering the daring of the Marauders—"Courage is praised in song and story, but courage without reason or justice is only the courage of a wild animal, or a bully."

The boy frowned again, scraping the last of the icing from his plate. "So none of the houses are bad."

"Certainly not. All of them have their good points. It's how you express your ambition, loyalty, studiousness, or courage that makes the difference. And of course, it's ridiculous to think that everyone in a house is the same. Everyone is mixture of the house virtues. Some Gryffindors are loyal, and some Ravenclaws are brave. Hufflepuffs can be ambitious, and Slytherins can work very hard—when all else fails." He smirked slyly.

Harry laughed. "Which houses were my Mum and Dad in?"

"Oh, Gryffindor, the both of them. I suspected your mother would be, of course. She was absolutely fearless. And since many Potters have been in Gryffindor, it's not surprising that your father was too. You'll find that houses seem to run in families. Sometimes I wonder if children are too concerned about disappointing their parents. All the Weasleys have been Gryffindors. That redheaded boy at the shop, I believe, is a Weasley."

"I don't think I'm very brave. Do you think my Mum and Dad would be disappointed if I weren't in Gryffindor?"

"I wasn't close enough to your father to say, but I do know that your mother would be very proud of you, no matter what your house. She would want you to be in the house that suited you best."

"How do you get put in a house?"

Snape's smirk grew conspiratorial. "That, Mr Potter, is a secret. You'll know, soon enough."

Chapter 7

Harry was in no hurry to leave the restaurant. His throat was thick with the cool, rich milk, and with talking—talking more than he ever had in his life before tonight. It was simply super, sitting with someone who understood about him and didn't shout and didn't shove and didn't call him names. Aunt Petunia always made a point of "warning" his teachers about him each year, telling them that he was a troublemaker and a liar. After that, even the nice ones looked at him with a little suspicion.

Not Professor Snape, though. He knew Aunt Petunia was the liar. He had stood up to her—he had towered over her and made her listen to him. He had shown Harry a whole new secret world—a world where Harry Potter belonged. He had promised Harry that he would have a room of his own and that he would go to Professor Snape's magic school, instead of to Stonewall High. So far, so—great!

But what will Uncle Vernon say? As nasty as Aunt Petunia could be, as bullying as Dudley was, Harry knew that all real power at Number Four, Privet Drive lay in the moist and meaty hands of Vernon Dursley. Harry always watched those hands from the corner of his eye. He had his pride, and did his best not to flinch, and never to grovel, and to stand up for himself as far as he could, but it was always a good idea to keep track of Uncle Vernon's hands...

Professor Snape's hands were very different. Long-fingered and expressive, they looked like hands that did interesting things. They were callused and marked with a few small scars. Harry wondered what making Potions entailed, exactly. Harry's hands had marks like that too, from cutting vegetables and getting splashed with hot bacon grease. The fact that his hands were something like Professor Snape's pleased him no end.

And I have green eyes like my Mum. She had been a real witch and very smart. Professor Snape said that she was a top student, and liked Charms and Potions best. Harry could hardly wait to look at his schoolbooks. He hadn't told Professor Snape half of the foul things he had heard about her and Dad. Professor Snape was put out enough when he heard the car crash story. What would he say if he

knew that Uncle Vernon said they were drunks? What if he knew that Aunt Marge had said that Dad was a worthless layabout, and Mum was—Mum was—

Harry frowned and pressed his lips together. He would never repeat such lies to anyone. Fiercely, he wished Aunt Marge were here too, so Professor Snape could tell her off good and proper!

Snape saw the boy's frown, and raised his brows in inquiry. "You are not eager to discuss the matter with your relations?"

"Oh!" Harry realized that Professor Snape had been talking about going back to Privet Drive. He shrugged. "Uncle Vernon doesn't like anybody to tell him what to do. His face turns a funny shade of purple, and he clenches his hands like this"—Harry made a fist—"and he narrows his eyes like this--"

Snape snorted at Harry's attempt at a menacing squint.

"—and then he starts yelling. When he's really angry he starts out soft and gets louder and louder." Harry made a sour face. "I know you're a wizard and everything, but you should be careful around him. You know how people say 'his bark is worse than his bite?' That's not like Uncle Vernon at all. The teachers at my school are afraid of him. The neighbors, too. I can tell."

"I've faced far worse than a purple-faced muggle in my time, Mr Potter. Nonetheless, I thank you for the information. It doesn't do to underestimate an opponent, even if he doesn't have a wand."

Snape paid the bill and the two of them left the restaurant, which was now filling up with customers. Busy as she was, the waitress gave Harry a bright smile and a "Goodnight! Happy birthday!" as they departed. Harry smiled back, and braced himself to face the confrontation to come.

"Professor Snape—"

"What is it, Mr Potter?"

"No matter what happens, I want you to know that this was the greatest birthday—no, the greatest day of my life. I wanted to thank you for the books and the dinner and the cake and going with me and talking to me. It was really neat, talking to you. I've never talked to grownups much." He kicked at a stone. "I've never talked so much to anyone before. So—thank you."

Snape quite suddenly realized that the boy thought things were not going to turn out at all well tonight. He caught Harry by the shoulder and looked into his eyes for a second, catching a glimpse of himself slinking away, tail between his legs, bested by a huge troll of a muggle. The next image was one of the boy himself being thrown bodily into his cupboard, while the Dursleys laughed triumphantly.

Irritated, he snapped, "Stop right there and listen well. Vernon Dursley will not get the better of me, Mr Potter! And you will have a room of your own and you will go to Hogwarts!" He gestured to an alley, "Step over here. I'll apparate us back directly to Privet Drive. In fact—" He concentrated, and in the space of two breaths they were standing in the upstairs hall of the Dursley home. Harry's jaw dropped, but Snape raised a finger for silence.

He whispered, "Ordinarily, it's unthinkable rude to apparate directly into someone's house. However, I don't care to have your uncle try to slam the door in my face. Let's see if your Aunt has done as I told her to."

Silently, he made his way the few feet down the hall to the smallest bedroom. He looked back to see Harry tip-toeing behind him, in conscientious and ridiculous mimicry. Harry gave him a guileless, trusting smile. Snape rolled his eyes. Somehow I really don't see Slytherin in his future.

They slipped into the room and had a look about. Snape blew out a breath. What a dump! Hadn't he heard that phrase in a film once? "What. A. Dump!"

It was a barren, dismal place. Petunia had indeed cleaned it. The windows were washed, the bare wooden floor was swept, the piles of rubbish were gone. What was left was the most unwelcoming room Snape had ever seen this side of a cell in Azkaban. In fact, it looked rather like a prisoner's cell. The narrow bed was made up with sheets as coarse as sandpaper, a thin and mingy grey blanket, and the flattest, sorriest imitation of a pillow in existence. The straight-backed wooden chair must have come from a factory office. The chest of drawers looked even cheaper than before. It was unfinished pine, and the inside of the drawers was hardly more than pasteboard. Topping it was the only lamp in the room: a hideous object featuring two children with huge heads and grotesque eyes like those of lemurs. They were apparently well-dressed famine victims, to judge from their garishly bright clothing and spindly bodies. The torn shade was made aggressively cheerful with a trimming of little orange velvet balls. Snape turned to express his opinion of this enormity.

The boy was beaming, exactly as if he thought the room was magnificent.

"All mine!" he murmured. "I've never slept in a proper bed before, you know."

"Yes," Snape managed, trying not to blast something. "I know." He cleared his throat quietly, and said, "Let us surprise your relatives." He stepped out of the room and frowned. There was noise coming from the next room. He peered warily, and Harry peered warily in his turn, some two feet below him. Fat Boy was watching his telly, ears covered with huge headphones. He was devouring an enormous bowl of ice cream, dripping chocolate on the floor as he crammed the overloaded spoon into his mouth. Like a Strasbourg goose, Snape thought in disgust.

"It's his favorite program," Harry whispered. "He won't hear a thing, not even if there were thunder and lightning!"

"Good," Snape sneered. "Very good. Now come along, but stay behind me." He gripped his wand tightly, and made his way to the staircase.

From the top of a stairs was a straight view down toward the lounge and the front door. Snape edged to the corner and heard the Dursleys before he saw them. They were waiting at the front door like a pair of cats at a mousehole.

"—tell me what to do in my own house!" A man's voice, throbbing with rage. A pompous, self-satisfied voice. Snape hated that voice.

"We've got to be careful, Vernon," Petunia was saying. "You don't know all the tricks these freaks can do! I knew him when we were children, and he was just like the boy—sneaking and deceitful, making trouble whenever he could! He's vicious, Vernon! He once used his freakishness to drop a tree branch on my head!"

Snape smirked. Harry grinned.

Petunia was still going on about it. "I could have been killed! But it's typical of them. He's one of the worst, Vernon. I was so terrified this afternoon. I couldn't make a sound! He threw me onto the couch and I couldn't move! He said he'd turn you into a cockroach if you gave him trouble! And he threatened our Dudley!"

The man's voice took on a crafty tone. "Then we won't give him a chance, Petunia! When they come back, open the door and let them in. Then slam it behind them and drop to the floor. We'll see who's the better man! No one threatens Dudley!"

Drop to the floor? Just what is he planning? Snape risked a glance--

--And saw the light running down the gleaming barrel of the shotgun in Vernon Dursley's hands.

Snape grasped Harry's shoulder with a grip of iron. When the boy looked up, wide-eyed, Snape pointed firmly at the floor and mouthed, "Wait here!"

For two knuts he would have killed them. Or transfigured them into cockroaches and stamped on them. Or into mayflies and then opened

the door-- The lifespan of a mayfly was extraordinarily short. Within a day or two—

There was an ancient Roman curse that could turn them into human-shaped piles of lava dust. There was a dustpan in Potter's cupboard. It would be fitting, perhaps—

He briefly allowed himself to indulge in the fantasy, but he knew he would have to face Dumbledore later, and Dumbledore would not understand. Not even if they had threatened his life, and possibly the boy's.

Therefore, he would do this with a minimum of violence. Not the way Dumbledore would choose, perhaps, but with extreme restraint, nevertheless.

Softly, he cast a Jelly-Legs Jinx first on Vernon, and then on Petunia. As they stumbled and fell, completely disoriented, he dealt with the shotgun.

"Good evening," he greeted them, coming down the stairs. "So kind of you to wait up for us."

Petunia uttered a thin, wild shriek. Vernon bellowed in rage, scrambling clumsily on hands and knees, fumbling for his weapon. He staggered toward Snape, face flushed purple.

With an air of cool inquiry, Snape asked, "Are you going to hit me with that---"

Vernon reached him, and tried to fire.

"—fish?"

"Bloody---bastard!" Vernon dropped the gleaming, thrashing twenty-pound salmon to the floor. Petunia screeched, pointing at it in disbelief and indignation.

"Sit down and shut up!" Snape roared in command. With a few flicks, the Dursleys were immobilized, staring at him in silent hatred and

horror. "That's better. I've never seen such a pair of bumbling idiots. That doesn't excuse your evil intent, of course. Did you actually think you could get away with killing me? How were going to keep the boy quiet afterwards, do you imagine?"

He looked deep in their eyes, and what he saw revolted him. Petunia, at least, only pictured imprisonment and threats and starvation. Vernon's image of a two shrouded forms dumped at a distant construction site and covered with cement disturbed him more. The salmon flopped feebly on the white carpet, and then lay still.

Staring at the man, he hissed, "Two birds with one stone? Is that how you pictured it? It's never going to happen. You have no idea of the things I could do to you, but unlike you, I have a few shreds of decency. Oh—we haven't been introduced, have we? I am Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Vernon Dursley, I presume?"

The man's face was a study. Snape fought back a grin, and called out, "You can come down now, Mr Potter. I have the situation well in hand."

The boy descended the stairs slowly, eyes huge and fixed on the helpless couple sprawled on the floor. "Where did the fish come from?" he wondered. "Should I throw it away? It's making a mess of the carpet."

"That," Snape said repressively, "is the Dursleys' problem, not yours. Not ever again. You see that they can do nothing to harm us. And your uncle does look rather colorful, I must say. That particular shade of pinkish-purple is called puce, Mr Potter. It is just the shade you want to achieve when making a potion called Skin Regenerator. Commit it to memory."

"Yes, sir," Harry answered dutifully. "Puce," he murmured to himself, trying to remember the strange word.

A bellow interrupted the lesson. "Mum!" Dudley demanded from upstairs. "I need more ice cream!"

"Ah, yes," mused Snape, "the third member of the Unholy Family. I think we should have Dudders join our conference. Mr Potter, go get your cousin."

Harry blew out a breath and dashed up the stairs. Dudley was still watching telly, grunting in approval at an explosion.

"Dudley!" Harry yelled to get his attention. He pulled the headphones away from an ear and shouted, "Dudley! Your Mum and Dad need you downstairs."

Dudley turned narrowed eyes on him and pushed him away roughly. "What are you doing here, freak? Dad said you were gone for good."

"Well, I'm not, and they want to talk to you right now!" He ducked as Dudley chuckled a remote at him, and ran back downstairs. Dudley lumbered after him, shouting, "Get me some ice cream or you'll be sorry!"

Dudley was halfway downstairs when he saw Snape. His dull gaze widened, and he saw his parents, lying unmoving on the floor. With a squeal, he tried to turn and run, but after an "Immobilus!" and a "Mobilcorpus!" he was downstairs and next to his father, eyes bulging.

"Dudley—I can call you Dudley, can't I?" Snape asked, with a mocking smile. "Your parents and I—and Mr Potter there—" he inclined his head in Harry's direction—"feel that it's time you learned some important things about your family history. First of all, magic is real. That's why you're on the floor, unable to move. I did that. I'm a wizard. So is your cousin. I came today, because you cousin will soon be starting his studies in the finest school of magic in the world, Hogwarts. Your parents seem to have some problems with that, but it's simply too bad. Mr Potter is a wizard and must be educated as becomes his station in life. His mother—your Aunt Lily--was a witch and his father a wizard. They were highly regarded in the wizarding world. They did not die in a car crash, but were murdered by an evil being called—" he winced—"Lord Voldemort. After the evil wizard killed your aunt and uncle, he attempted to kill your cousin too, but he failed and was destroyed. Mr Potter is very famous in the wizarding world, and was placed with his muggle family so he would not be

inconvenienced by celebrity stalkers. Muggle means 'non-magical,'" he explained condescendingly. "The three of you are muggles.

"However, you and your mother and your father have failed to be anything resembling a normal, decent family. You've tormented your orphaned cousin. He's been undernourished and neglected and locked in a cupboard. Money rightfully belonging to him has not been used for his benefit. For those crimes your parents can go to prison for many years. Have you even heard the term 'child abuse,' Dudley? I'm sure you have. Did you associate it with your cousin? Well, you should have. Your mistreatment of your cousin stops now. Any harassment of Mr Potter—" he turned a menacing glare at each of three Dursleys in turn—"stops today, or there will be consequences. Permanent consequences. Mr Potter now has his own room—what was once your second bedroom. Anything left in it is his. You will not insult him, you will not trouble him, you will not demean him to your associates."

Snape paused, feeling frustrated. His Legilimency made it evident that he was not getting through to these people. They were waiting for him to leave so they could punish the boy. There was no realization that they were wrong: there was simply anger and fear and resentment. They had had control of the boy so long that they viewed their treatment of him as part of the natural order of things, which a freakish monster was unfairly attempting to subvert. It was time to try something else.

"Stupefy!" As he cast the spell on each of them, their eyes shut. Wearily, he turned to Harry. "I'm sick of this lot. Let's go have another look at your room. They'll stay here until I remove the spell."

"Do you think they'll do as you say?" Harry asked as they climbed the stairs.

"They will when I'm done with them. I'll make certain you're safe for the night, and then I'm going to talk with the Headmaster at length about your situation. It may be best that you live elsewhere." Snape considered taking the boy directly to Hogwarts, but felt uneasy about it. Dumbledore had always been so very positive that Potter needed to be with his family. It was possible that there was something about

the situation that Snape did not know. "I promise I'll be back in the morning, and then we'll decide what to do."

Harry ran into his new room and bounced gingerly on his new bed. "This is brilliant!" he grinned. "Look! I even have a closet!" He ran to the closet door and opened it with a flourish.

"Whoa!" He jumped to dodge the avalanche of falling toys and books and clothes. Petunia, it seemed, had simply crammed the closet with the contents of the room. A suitcase tumbled out and burst open. A globe, detached from its broken stand, thumped to the floor and rolled to the wall under the window.

Snape and Harry looked at each other, and then at the jumble spilled out before them. Snape snarled, "Stupid woman. Never mind, Mr Potter, I'll get rid of this rubbish!" He raised his wand to vanish it.

"Wait!" Harry yelped. "Some of this might be good stuff! You said everything in the room was mine, didn't you?"

"Of course."

"Well, let me sort through it. Look, there are some books here, and Dudley's planetarium that he didn't want, and a lot of Legos!" Eagerly, he began pawing through the pile, pulling more things from the closet. "There's a leather jacket hanging up in here!" he told Snape, very excited. "Aunt Petunia always gives the good clothes away, but she hasn't taken the last lot yet!" Harry showed Snape a nearly new jacket of soft brown cowhide, and pleaded, "Do you think you could make other clothes fit me like you did before? Please, professor?"

Snape grimaced and allowed, "I suppose so. But not tonight. I must get back to Hogwarts and report to the Headmaster. I want you to get the things you need from the cupboard and get ready for bed. Fetch yourself a glass of water while you're about it. Before I leave, I'll lock the Dursleys in their bedrooms for the night and make sure they sleep late tomorrow. I'll put wards on your room so they can't possibly come in and bother you. You should be up and dressed before seven, because I'll be back then. Don't open your door to anyone but me. Am I perfectly clear?"

"Crystal, sir!" Harry then pointed out, "I don't have a clock."

"There's one in the guest room. You can borrow it for tonight."

While the boy gathered his belongings and showered—"using as much hot water as I like!"—Snape set about doing the things he had not particularly wanted the boy to witness. He roused Petunia, questioned her about the location of documents relating to the boy's child benefits and where the money in the house was kept. Her resistance was futile, since Snape took the information he wanted directly from her mind. Stunning her again, he located the appropriate papers and then removed the eighty-odd pounds from Vernon's wallet. Dumbledore might not approve the use of the Imperius curse, but Snape had a potion in his stores that would serve nearly as well tomorrow.

We'll visit the bank, and we'll get the boy some muggle clothes—

"I'm all ready for bed now, sir!" the boy called in his clear voice.

"I'll be up presently," Snape called back. Quickly he moved the older Dursleys to their own room, and Dudley to his. He turned off the lights and the insupportable glare of the television. He roused them from the stunners only to cast a Morpheus charm on them that would keep them asleep for twelve hours.

Locking their doors, he then went to find Potter, scrubbed clean and smiling, sitting in the midst of his booty.

"You need your rest, Mr Potter," Snape told him. "You've had a busy day today, and tomorrow will be much the same."

"I don't know if I can sleep!" Harry said. "This is all so brilliant! Will you really be back tomorrow, sir? Do you promise?"

Snape lifted his wand, and intoned, "I, Severus Snape, swear on my magic that I will return tomorrow. Are you satisfied now?"

"Yes, sir! Can't I stay up a little longer?"

"No. Into bed with you. Did you set the alarm?"

"For six o'clock, sir. I want to get up and work on my things in the morning."

"Very well. Your relatives will not awaken until after eight. Expect me at seven. And what did I say about opening the door?"

"Only if it's you."

"Right, then." He gestured peremptorily at the bed, and the boy jumped in, drawing the bedclothes up to his chin.

"I've got real sheets!" he told Snape.

"So you do." Snape then bespelled the door and after a moment's hesitation, the window. No muggle could enter through them, and unless led directly to them, no muggle would even take notice of their existence. He saw the boy watching him intently, repeating the incantations soundlessly. He rewarded the attention with a sour smile, and flipped off the light.

Harry said softly, "Good night, Professor Snape. Thanks again!"

"Good night, Mr Potter. Sleep well, and—happy birthday."

He shut the door of the darkened room behind him, and cast a shield charm on it. Now the muggles could not even kick it in, even if they noticed it. Feeling he had done everything he could to protect Lily's child for the moment, he apparated silently back to the gates of Hogwarts.

Harry lay awake for some time, smiling into the darkness, relishing the softness of the mattress under his body. He believed, for the first time he could remember, that he had a future worth living for.

Thank you, all my kind reviewers. I am hoping that after these Easter holidays (Holiday--Ha!) I can begin responding properly to your comments.

Yes, the "fish" line is adapted from the movie Dogma.

Chapter 8

Snape stormed up to Hogwarts on wings of righteous indignation. The great doors slammed open. Filch tottered forward, gaping, and then retreated at the look on the Potion Masters face. Mrs. Norris yowled and made a dash for safety. Snape ignored both of them equally, intent on his destination.

Up a flight of stairs, then another. Down an endless hall. Another flight of stairs attempted to delay him, and he shot a blast of blue fire at it. It obeyed his will meekly. He was making a great deal of noise, but could not be bothered to care. It was when he ascended the last of the long staircases that he realized that someone was calling his name.

"Severus! Stop!" McGonagall was running after him, skirts of her robes lifted. "Stop! What's wrong? Severus!" She threw out her wand hand and a stone wall blocked his path. Snape nearly brained himself running into it. He stopped with a jerk, and swore vilely.

"Severus!" The Deputy Headmistress clutched her side, gasping for breath. "What has happened? Is Harry all right?"

Snape considered blasting the transfigured wall to bits, but knew that would only make things worse. He whirled on the surprised witch, snarling.

"No! Things are not all right! Do you know what those bloody muggles have been doing all these years? Did you ever wonder? I bloody wonder if Albus knows, and if he does, he'll answer to me!"

She caught at his shoulder and forced him to face her. "Is Harry hurt?"

The raw look of pain on her lined face composed him. This was not her fault--or not much her fault, at least. She had at least asked to visit the boy.

"He's spent the last ten years as a house elf," he told her bluntly. "Allowed to go to school, yes, but punished if he dared to outperform

his bullying lump of a cousin. He cooks and cleans and slaves in the garden: all for scant rations, his cousin's castoff rags, and the privilege--" he sneered into her horrified face"--of being allowed to sleep on the floor of the cupboard under the stairs with the mops and spiders. Before today, he had never had clothes that fit him, or a piece of cake that was not scavenged from the dustbin, or a genuine conversation with an adult who wished him well. My arrival so enraged the muggles that tonight they attempted to shoot us on our return. The muggle uncle has wanted to get rid of the boy for years, in the most direct way, but didn't dare. Tonight was a very close-run thing."

"And you left him there?" Minerva asked, horrified.

"The muggles are in their rooms sleeping off a Morpheus charm. The boy is in his new bedroom--his cousin's second bedroom--which I warded heavily. I don't want Albus to dismiss what I have to say. I couldn't bear to bring the boy to Hogwarts with a promise of safety, only to have Albus send him back to those monsters. I'm going back to Privet Drive early tomorrow, by which time I hope to have wrangled a better placement for the child. I've got to see Albus now. Is he in his office?"

"Yes--I think so" She vanished the stone wall, and matched his stride as he hurried along the hall. "I'm coming with you--!"

"Good." He snapped. "I want a witness. If the old man so much as thinks about obliterating me, he'll regret it."

"--and I'll go with you to see Harry in the morning!"

"Just as you like. I'll want a witness there too. And I'm taking a camera!"

"A shotgun?" Albus queried, somewhat taken aback. "How did you deal with that?"

Snape gave McGonagall a slight bow. "I may not have been your prize student, but I have some small skill in Transfiguration. The shotgun became a handsome salmon. Dursley was quite at loss."

"Oh, well done, Severus!" Minerva enthused, almost clapping her hands. "Both silvery and long. Excellent choice!" She peered at him and asked, "Did you succeed in animating it?"

"It flopped and fought very authentically. It even smelled fishy."

His former teacher nodded. "That definitely merits an Exceeds Expectations. Well done!"

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed absently, "Well done, Severus. Very well done, indeed! But what did you do to the Dursleys that caused them to take such drastic action?"

Minerva's lips thinned to invisibility. "Don't blame the victim, Albus. You're always doing that."

"Do I really? I simply mean to say that Severus can sometimes--you understand me, dear boy--sometimes rub people the wrong way."

"I deprived them of their household slave and scapegoat," Snape replied curtly. "They were not best pleased. And I told them that their days of abuse and neglect were over."

"Abuse is a very serious accusation, Severus! Without proof--"

"I have all the proof I need and all you can possibly require. I saw for myself the cupboard under the stairs where the boy has been made to sleep all these years--"

"They may be very poor, Severus--a small house--"

"They are a well-to-do middle class family. Their house has four bedrooms. One is the Dursleys' own, one is a guest room used only once or twice a year, one is their son's, and the last and smallest is also their son's. He keeps his broken toys and discarded clothing there. It is a deliberate act of spite. Mr Potter cooks their breakfast,

and has from a very young age. He, however, is underfed--small for his age, and showing signs of malnutrition. He needs a thorough physical examination when he arrives at Hogwarts, and he will require dietary supplements to restore his health. He has been routinely verbally abused and occasionally struck. All in all, the Dursleys have done everything in their power to make him believe himself worthless and--a freak. That is the name they often use to address him. 'Freak.'" Snape felt angry satisfaction at Albus' concerned frown and Minerva's indignation. "Yes, they taught their son to call him that and to refer to him so when speaking with his gang of bullies. I found out a number of things that none of them said aloud. The boy has been taught to think of himself in that way. That word was used to describe his parents to him--as worthless, penniless freaks, killed in a car crash that was caused by their own drunken carelessness!"

"Stop!" Minerva waved her hand in a gesture of denial. "This is too horrible! I hope you gave those vile muggles a good fright! The poor child cannot stay there another night!"

"I considered bringing him to Hogwarts at once," Snape admitted, "but I thought it would be best to discuss a better placement with you first, before dragging the boy from place to place and thoroughly disorienting him. When I asked the boy which of the spare rooms he wanted for his own for the night, he showed a certain modesty in choosing the smallest. I instructed Petunia to clean it thoroughly and prepare it for her nephew. She crammed all the rubbish from the room into the closet, but at least the boy will lie in a bed tonight--for the first time in his life! The Dursleys will sleep until five past eight tomorrow, and I warded the boy's bedroom thoroughly. I promised to return at seven tomorrow and take him where he is to go."

"Perhaps I should go," Dumbledore said, with a sigh of regret, "and I can explain to Harry why he will be staying with his aunt and uncle until he is of age."

There was an awful, shocked silence. Then both professors exploded, alto and baritone voices protesting in counterpoint.

"--Really, Albus! You can't be serious! We should go and retrieve him tonight!"

"--He will not stay there, Headmaster! And I will go to him tomorrow! I swore it on my magic! Do you mean to make a squib of me?"

Dumbledore only put up a hand for silence. After a baffled moment, it was granted him.

He told them gravely, "Harry can only be safe where his mother's blood dwells. As her last act in life, Lily used Old Blood Magic to shelter her beloved child. This magic in turn has cast powerful blood wards over Number Four Privet Drive. Voldemort and his followers cannot attack Harry, but only while he calls the Dursleys' residence home."

Minerva looked a little skeptical. Snape looked downright disbelieving.

The Headmaster continued despite their reaction. "Harry can be safe there, and only there. He must call the house his home, and he must return each summer to his blood relatives in order for the power of familial love to recharge the wards. To place him anywhere else would be to trifle with his life."

There was another brief pause.

Then Snape fixed Dumbledore with an unblinking stare, and said coldly, "Pull the other one. It's got bells on it."

"I beg your pardon?" The Supreme Mugwump was astonished.

"You heard me. I don't believe you. I've never heard of blood wards that behaved in such a way. I've never heard of blood wards that could be recharged by muggles. Blood wards only need to be recharged once in a generation at most, not on a continuing basis. How can I make myself any clearer? I don't believe you. Lily's protection I suppose is possible, though many another witch died trying to protect her children. I can believe that it might be forged by her great love for her child, but don't tell me that such wards can be affected by her muggle sister and her muggle nephew. Neither of

them has the magic required to feed any kind of ward, and neither of them feels anything resembling love for Lily's son or Lily herself."

"I assure you that it is all perfectly true," Dumbledore declared loftily.

"Albus--" Minerva said in a low, warning tone.

Snape raised his voice. "I don't believe a word of it. 'The power of familial love?' Potter certainly does not feel love for his so-called family. It surprises me that he does not hate them enough to have already killed them with accidental magic. As for the Dursleys--Dudley barely regards his cousin as human. At most, he's a despised servant and a convenient whipping boy. Petunia might once have loved Lily, but that is gone now. All that remains is resentment and bitterness, and an ugly sort of superiority because she lived and her sister died and left her child without a defender. She loathes Potter--really loathes him. It gives her pleasure to thwart him and starve him and humiliate him and show him what a worthless nothing--what a waste of space-- he is."

"Severus--my boy--" Dumbledore protested sadly.

Snape continued ruthlessly, "She loathes many things, beginning with her life. Oh yes, I took a long look into Petunia Evans' sordid mind. She's not as stupid or blind as she appears. She knows her husband is a blustering brute. She knows that her son is an obese little bully with neither brains nor charm. She feels trapped in a marriage she only agreed to because she wanted to score off Lily, who was married just out of school. So Petunia snatched at the first prospect that came her way, and managed to bear a son earlier than her sister. It was a Pyrrhic victory, of course, because in winning it she sacrificed all her dreams and hopes--her passionate desire to go to university, her secret ambition for adventure in the diplomatic service--and now she has nothing to show for it but an obsessively clean suburban home, a husband she finds repulsive, and a son who is an utter disappointment. Torturing Harry is actually the highlight of her day."

"A few chores--" Dumbledore objected. McGonagall hissed angrily.

Snape's voice rose to the next register. "You're not listening to me, Albus! The other boy does nothing. If you think Draco Malfoy is spoiled, you haven't met Dudley Dursley. He had two rooms, Albus! Two rooms! --while Potter slept on a dirty pad on the floor of a boot cupboard. He is encouraged to hurt his cousin--praised for hitting him--and any lie of his is automatically the truth. You claim these alleged wards make the boy safe, but you are wrong. He's not safe from his family, Albus. One of these days, they're likely to kill him. You're lucky they didn't make an end of him tonight."

"I hardly think--"

"And there you have it! You didn't think! You love to pretend that everyone is full of fine feelings and noble intentions, but that belief flies in the face of everything you've experienced your entire life. I don't say that the Dursleys would ordinarily plan a murder in cold blood. What is likely to happen would be called a 'tragic accident.' Vernon will squeeze the boy's throat just a little too long, or Petunia will hit him in the head with the iron frying pan with just a little more force than in the past-- yes, Minerva, I saw her memory of it, and she enjoyed it thoroughly-- or his great beast of a cousin will shove him just a little too hard when the boy is at the top of the stairs. Everyone will be very sad, and it won't do the boy a bloody bit of good, because he'll be dead all the same."

Dumbledore gave Snape a cajoling twinkle. "Severus, have you come to care for the boy?"

"How dare you?" Snape rose, eyes blazing. "How dare you make a mockery of my vow to protect Lily's child? How dare you try to manipulate this conversation away from the main point--which is that the boy cannot continue to live with those muggles, or he will cease to live. He's not safe there, and he must have a better home."

"Nevertheless, Harry must continue to live with the Dursleys," Dumbledore replied calmly.

McGonagall burst out, "Albus! This is madness! How can you in good conscience let the boy suffer so? He could come to Hogwarts. I'm

sure he would be no trouble at all. Any number of wizarding homes would be proud to take him in--"

"Exactly."

Snape was seething. "Then choose one amongst them. Put the boy with one of your pet Gryffindors if you must, but get him away from the muggles." He reconsidered. "Or let him come here. He's--not a bad boy. Willing enough to learn and glad to have a chance at last."

"Not much like James Potter, Severus?"

"Really, Albus!" Minerva exclaimed angrily.

Snape sneered down at the white-haired Headmaster. "I am overjoyed to say that he's not like him at all. How could he be? The boy has no memory of his father. There is little resemblance aside from their hair. An innocent boy, without his father's arrogance or vanity. He's much more his mother's child. Very inquisitive, very eager to begin his studies. Yes. Let him come here. Minerva is right in saying that he would be unlikely to cause trouble."

"My friends," Dumbledore sighed. "If only it were that easy. Unfortunately, I have no right at all to do as you suggest. If I were reckless enough to attempt it, I would be found out, and young Harry would pay the price. I am not his legal guardian, first of all."

"Well, then, who is?" McGonagall asked sharply.

"You know, I don't believe he actually has one. The Potters left no instructions in their will beyond giving guardianship to Sirius Black in case of their deaths. That," he pointed out, "is obviously out of the question. I put him with his closest living relatives, because no one would think to question the right of blood."

"Have someone apply to act as guardian, then!" McGonagall urged him. "Apply yourself!"

Dumbledore did not answer directly. After a moment's silence, he murmured, "Our world believes so much in the power of blood. It

defines us all out lives. The ties of blood are all in all. If anyone attempted to claim Harry Potter-- and I do not except myself-- such a claim would be challenged--almost certainly successfully--by those with the closest blood relationship to the boy."

Another silence, as the people in the room began reviewing the genealogical charts in their heads. Dumbledore ticked the possibilities off with growing gravity. "James Potter was the only son of an only son--of an only son. There are no Potter uncles or aunts or cousins. James' mother, as you know, Minerva, was your old friend Lydia McKinnon. Her only brother and his entire family were massacred by Voldemort. That leaves James' grandfather, who married--" he lifted his brows, waiting for the answer.

Snape refused to speak. McGonagall cleared her throat. "Dorea Black." Her expression took on a pinched look.

"Exactly," Dumbledore acknowledged her grimly. "Young Harry's closest living blood relatives in the wizarding world are the Black sisters. Only third cousins once removed, of course, but unquestionably the ones with the best claim to him. Happily, Bellatrix Lestrange has made herself ineligible due to her residence in Azkaban--"

"Andromeda Tonks," Snape broke in uncertainly, "is considered a pleasant woman--"

"If I offered Harry to Andromeda and her muggleborn husband Ted, they would be instantly challenged by her sister Narcissa and her pureblood husband Lucius. If the case came before the Wizengamot--which I do not doubt it would--which do you think would triumph? Andromeda Tonks' pleasant nature, or Lucius Malfoy's influence and immense fortune? You may as well tell me to hand the boy over to Lucius at once. So you must forgive my well-intentioned fable about Lily's blood protection depending upon her muggle relatives. The blood protection seems to be real enough, and it is essential that the boy be kept away from certain elements in our own world."

After a moment, Snape growled, "Say what you will about Lucius, but he would not starve the boy or lock him in a cupboard. He's not his

father Abraxas, after all. He's more likely to be excessively indulgent. Being the guardian of the Boy-Who-Lived could only add to his prestige. He would hardly murder someone so valuable."

"Oh, Severus!" McGonagall groaned.

"Perhaps you are right," Dumbledore allowed mildly. "But a wizarding guardian can do all sorts of things to his ward, and many of them would be undetectable. I hardly think going from excessive severity to excessive indulgence would be very much in the child's best interests. And then too, Harry would be exposed to the most hard-line views of blood purity. Would you have him listen to his mother being described as a 'mudblood?' Would you want him to learn to speak of her in such a way? Do you think young Draco would actually like having to share his parents with someone else on a daily basis? Might not Harry find living with him too much like being under the thumb of his muggle cousin? And of course, as you so wisely point out, there is always the possibility of a 'tragic accident' that would be no one's fault."

"I take your point about the Malfoys," Snape agreed, "but the boy cannot continue where he is."

"He must. I will speak to the Dursleys, if necessary, and counsel them to treat the child better."

At the end of his patience, Snape shouted, "They won't listen to you!" He ran a hand through his hair, frustrated with the conversation. "Talk to them? It's like talking to a stone wall! They're stupid and malicious and think they can get away with anything! Worse still, they think they have a right to harm the boy--they've even stolen his money from the muggle government and lavished it on their own child. I won't have it! Why can't the boy live in one of his own houses? You needn't tell anyone. We could find a housekeeper or a caretaker and demand a Vow of silence--"

"Harry doesn't have a house of his own," Dumbledore said flatly. "At the time of the attack, James and Lily were in hiding at my own cottage in Godric's Hollow."

"Wait, Albus," Minerva objected. "The Potters owned a lovely manor in Norfolk. I've visited there many a time! They had a little hunting lodge in Caithness and a summer home in France! Severus' idea has some merit. What do you mean, he hasn't a home of his own?"

"Just that. Harry Potter has nowhere to go. The last war was a great drain on everyone's resources, and James did more than his part. There were whole years when he was supported most of the Order of the Phoenix, and of course neither he nor Lily could be gainfully employed. There were agents to be financed, safe houses to be rented, rare items to obtain, and information to be bought. Lives were ransomed and debts were paid. James sold the summer house to a French family--the Delacours--and the hunting lodge was razed and the land sold to muggle developers."

"I can't believe it!" McGonagall gasped.

"What about the manor?" Snape asked urgently. "I noticed at Gringotts that the boy's vault held only enough to put him through school--and only gold at that! Are the family heirlooms kept at the manor?"

"I cannot say," Dumbledore shrugged, "but if they are, they are beyond Harry's reach."

McGonagall was outraged. "James can't have sold the Manor! It was magically entailed! He couldn't possibly sell a family seat--something that had been in the Potter family for seven hundred years!"

"My dear Minerva," Dumbledore soothed, "James and Lily had very modern views on inherited property, and were not very sentimental about such things when there was a war to be fought."

"What are you saying?" she demanded fiercely.

"You are right in saying that they could not sell the Manor. However, the war effort needed money so very badly. Well, the truth is that James leased the manor to Celestina Warbeck, and took the entire sum up front."

Snape felt ill. "Leased for how long?"

"Ninety-nine years. With luck, it will be back in Potter hands eventually."

"The money is gone?" McGonagall asked, horrified.

"For the most part," Dumbledore conceded. "Harry will have to work to earn his bread. But of course that is years in the future. For now, he has an adequate sum remaining to buy his books and whatever trifles a schoolboy fancies."

Snape pressed on desperately. "There must be other things--jewels and books and magical items. Perhaps the Potters took them with them when they went into hiding. For God's sake, Albus! Lily had a wedding ring! Where the bloody hell is it?"

"Calm yourself, Severus." The Headmaster ordered. "When Lily's body was found, she was not wearing her ring, and neither she nor James had their wands. After Voldemort's demise all sorts of people were milling about the cottage. Very likely a number of things were taken. As to the rest, I don't know. Probably a great deal is at the Manor--and it will comfort you to know that those items cannot be removed from thence by anyone other than a Potter. James gave a few things into my keeping, and I will pass them on to Harry when he is old enough to appreciate them. Perhaps there were some things at the cottage, but that was mine to dispose of. As I told you, the Potters were using it only as a hiding place. Shortly after they were killed, I let the Ministry seal it off and make a shrine of it."

McGonagall said briskly, "Then I think we should go there soon and undertake a thorough search. I daresay there was considerable damage from the explosion and the weather, but there might be some things hidden away in closets or drawers that are rightfully the child's."

"I can't believe it," Snape repeated, feeling dazed. "All the money is gone? They went through the entire fortune before they were twenty-two?"

"War is an expensive business, my boy," Dumbledore confessed ruefully. "You are welcome to review all the pertinent records, if you like. James' inheritance did not compare with the resources people like the Malfoys or the Lestranges could command. The gold flowed out like water."

"And it's a child who pays the price!" Snape growled. "Don't smile at me, Headmaster! Don't patronize me! I tell you that the boy will not be thrown to the wolves! It's a travesty!"

"Severus, my boy, I tell you that there is no other option!"

Snape began pacing restlessly, muttering half to himself. "I've had offers, you know. The principal of Golden Gate Academy wrote to ask if I'd consider a move. The archchancellor of Miskatonic University wanted to recruit me for their Institute for Advanced Study--"

Dumbledore rose to his feet and declared, "Severus! You are not taking the boy and leaving the country! I forbid it!"

"Sod off! I'll do as I please! And it pleases me to see that the boy lives to grow up!"

Hands moved toward wands. Before they could be drawn, there was a THWACK! and a flash of hot red sparks, as Minerva McGonagall brought her own wand down on the desk.

"Stop it!" she shouted. "Stop all this ridiculous posturing! Listen to me! There--may--be a way to keep the child safe while keeping him technically under his family's roof."

Snape stared at her resentfully, face deathly pale. "It's impossible. You can't mean it."

"It is possible, if both of you will sit down and hear me out."

Dumbledore resumed his seat, and smiled sweetly on his former student. "I am all ears, my dear."

Chapter 9

Harry was up before dawn. He had slept fitfully through the night, waking to unfamiliar sensations of softness beneath him and too much space around him. It certainly wasn't unpleasant, but it was strange. By half past five, he was kneeling on his bed, looking at the apricot sky through his bedroom window. He could see like never before. It had been odd, not to need to fumble for his glasses, not to put them on so carefully, afraid of the sellotaped crack in the nosepiece. Everything was so clear! He could read the tiny print on the bottom of one of Dudley's boxes: "Collector's item for 14 years upwards." He could see things at a distance, too! He could read the street sign at the corner: "Wisteria Walk." If he looked down past his window sill, he could see the massy blooms of the hydrangeas, blue and pink and mixed. He opened the window, and breathed in air fragrant with fresh cut grass and summersweet. The low-angled light cast grey shadows on the plain white walls. His own room. It seemed very big to him, even with all the things piled on the bare wooden floor.

Next, he had the pleasure of making his--own--bed. He tucked in the corners just right, smoothed the blanket, and plumped up the pillow to the fullest possible extent. Then he stood back and sighed with satisfaction at a job well done. Professor Snape would see that Harry deserved to have the room that the Professor had fought for. The Professor promised to come back at seven o'clock. Harry shivered at the thought of what would happen if he did not. Then he decided to put aside his fears. He was in his new room. None of this was a dream. Professor Snape had defied the Dursleys, not once, but twice. He wasn't scared of them, and Harry saw no reason not to trust his word. He only wished it were seven o'clock already!

Should he put on yesterday's clothes? They were the only things that fit him well, but there was a smear of chocolate on the shirt, and the slacks were creased in places, even though Harry had folded them carefully the night before. Of course, if he put on something new, perhaps Professor Snape would shrink that for him as well, and then he would have two good sets of clothes! He sorted through the ragged grey underpants, chose the best of them, and put the rest carefully away in a drawer. No need for the Professor to see those!

His socks were pretty terrible too. Socks and underpants might not cost much, though. Maybe they could take a few quid and buy new. Maybe even some real pyjamas, too! Maybe at Gringotts he could have some of his magic money changed for the regular sort, and then he could get all sorts of things he'd always wanted. Did wizards ride bicycles?

But there was already so much right here! Harry chose one of the better-looking shirts from the closet, and a pair of khaki slacks like the Professor's. He buckled his good-as-new belt firmly, to hold the slacks up, and then considered his options.

Professor Snape had said not to open the door to anyone but him. He had also said the Dursleys were locked in, and would sleep until eight. Maybe he meant not opening the door if someone were there? Harry wanted to use the bathroom, brush the taste of sleep from his teeth, and get a fresh glass of cool water. He crept close to the door and listened. He could hear Dudley and Uncle Vernon snoring. Nothing seemed to be moving in the hall or downstairs. He could always tell if Aunt Petunia was up, because the slippers she wore had hard little heels that clacked on the kitchen tiles, and for such a scrawny woman she was not particularly light on her feet. She was never up at dawn, anyway. He took another look at the gorgeous colours in the sky. The Dursleys didn't know what they were missing.

If he were quick and quiet there should be no trouble. Mum would have gone, Harry told himself. Professor Snape says that she was fearless! Harry turned the knob very carefully, and eased the door open. He peered out, up and down the hall. The bedroom doors were shut. If he didn't turn the water on full blast, it would hardly make a noise at all. He could go barefoot, and that way he could be as stealthy as Professor Snape himself.

He was into the bathroom in a flash, glorying in his freedom. First into the bathroom today! No waiting, bladder about to burst, until Aunt Petunia unlocked his cupboard door. He grinned happily, enjoying the luxury of all the time he wanted in the bathroom. Washing his hands with hot water and plenty of soap, he studied his face in the mirror.

He looked different without his glasses. He looked like a new boy. He felt like a new boy!

"So I should," he whispered. "I'm a wizard, and I'm going to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry! I have a room full of gold and silver at the goblin bank, and I have a magic wand."

The green-eyed boy in the mirror agreed with his every word. He made silly faces back at Harry as he brushed his teeth with the good toothpaste. Grinning again, he let the water run until it was very cold, and then filled his glass to the trembling brim. Carefully, he tiptoed back to his room, and shut the door noiselessly. Yes!

He began sorting the treasures from the trash. The books were easy to do, and Harry piled them neatly in a tall stack in a corner. There were all sorts of books here he'd like to read--some he'd already read at school--and a few that failed to interest him, like the Dog Breeders' Guide, a birthday gift to Dudley from Aunt Marge. The books he knew he would never want went into a separate pile. He had promised Professor Snape to read his own birthday present books first, but afterwards he would read *Treasure Island* and *Riddle of the Sands* and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. To his vast delight, he found another book about the Bastable family, *The Would-be-Goods*. There was a student dictionary, too, which was not very exciting, but which might help him with schoolwork. Dutifully, Harry decided to put it in the "save" stack.

Some of the sports equipment was easy enough to deal with as well. The things that required a large outdoor area like the croquet set and the badminton net were obviously useless. So were the broken tennis racquets and the splintered cricket bats and the ice skates. That last made Harry shake his head. What was Aunt Petunia thinking? There were all sorts of deflated inflatable odds and ends. There were smashed toy machine guns that used to blink and make "realistic" noises. There were model kits without the pieces and pieces without the instructions and somehow a lot of colored sand from something Harry couldn't guess at. There was a real microscope, which Harry became rather excited about, but which proved to be without any lenses. He sighed and discarded it.

Harry quite liked Legos, but had never had much chance to play with them. Dudley had boxes and boxes of them. A few of the newest had real motors for making things that could move. Some of the sets were scattered, and some of the big pieces were broken, but there was plenty here for hours of fun. Harry gathered the Legos together into one large container, and noticed that there were grey, non-matching blocks amongst them. He dug further into the boxes and found that the grey blocks were part of a castle-building kit made in Spain. It was a huge set, complete with round turrets and arrow slits and conical roofs. Harry sorted the grey blocks back into the castle set and put that kit and the Legos to one side.

In another box of miscellany, he found the base of the globe. Professor Snape had fixed his glasses: maybe he could fix the globe, too? It was an especially nice one, with bumps where there were mountains. Dudley had spun it a few times and pronounced it "boring." And he had said the same thing about the Young Astronomers' Home Planetarium, which had a light inside and could show the constellations on the ceiling. They taught Astronomy at Hogwarts. Maybe he could use the planetarium to study the sky. He had never been out much at night, and the streetlights on Privet Drive were so bright that you couldn't see many stars anyway. The planetarium seemed to be all right, once Harry put it in its broken box the right way. The planetarium joined the globe and Legos.

There was a real easel, with a bolt missing, and there were all sorts of art supplies. Aunt Petunia had taken to heart the advice of one of her lady friends one year, who had gone on about the importance of the "enriched environment," and that "there was only a small window of opportunity in which to make your child's natural talents bloom." Aunt Petunia had talked to Uncle Vernon about the value of music lessons, but Uncle Vernon would not hear of piano lessons for Dudley, which he said were for "pansies."

"I won't have you making a bloody pansy of our Dudders, Pet! You'll be wanting to put him in tights and make a ballet-dancer of him next!"

And nothing had come of possible trumpet lessons or guitar lessons or any other kind of lessons. There was the constant fear that Harry might somehow "get at" any musical instruments carelessly left

unattended in the house, and "do something" to them. In the end, Dudley had resolutely declined to bloom, and his "natural talents" seemed to be limited to stuffing his face and menacing smaller children.

But the remains of the failed attempt were stored here. Harry particularly liked a big flat box filled with pastels and charcoals and watercolours and coloured pencils. A few items had been lost, but the set was a great improvement on his three crayon stubs. There were some sketchbooks and pads of art paper. Some of the paper was ruined, but quite a bit could be salvaged. That was added to the pile. There were boxes of stamps and ink pads, and all manner of craft kits. He would have to go over each of them carefully, to see what he liked.

Dudley had been given an elaborate chess set for his last birthday. Harry had thought it was interesting, but on opening the box, he found that being used as a platter had ruined the board, and half the pieces were missing. Disappointed, he set it in the "Discard" pile. So too with all of the board games. Besides, he had no one to play with. So Risk and Clue and Chinese Checkers and Trivial Pursuit were rejected, along with all the puzzles that the closet had held. Harry knew that there could not be a whole one amongst them, and he didn't want to spend hours working on one to find that a crucial piece was gone.

Dudley's first Walkman seemed to be all right, but the headphones were broken, and most of the tapes he could find were in bad shape. After some thought, Harry decided to keep it, and see if Professor Snape would allow him to buy new headphones and some tapes of his own. It would be neat to have music to listen to, and with headphones his relatives would never know.

There was a jumble of toy soldiers and action figures. Harry hadn't had the chance to see many of the programs and films that the action figures were based on, and kept only a few of the nicer ones. He had always liked hearing about Spiderman, and had once been able to read half of a comic book that Dudley had torn. Spiderman had special powers, too. The red and blue figure was surprisingly intact. Darth Vader and Luke, however, were missing their heads, and Princess Leia had been gruesomely burned to death after undergoing

unspeakable tortures at the hands of Dudley and Piers. Harry grimaced, and gave the three of them decent burial in the heap of things to be disposed of.

The box of lead figures he hesitated over. They were an expensive gift from a business acquaintance of Uncle Vernon's. Dudley had opened them at a party at the man's house, and then Aunt Petunia had put them away as soon as they were home. She had not wanted to throw them out just in case the acquaintance ever visited. Harry hefted the surprisingly heavy box. Special Collector's Edition: Arthur Pendragon. He lifted the lid and nearly shouted with joy.

Here were people dressed something like the wizards and witches he had seen yesterday! He studied each of the five exquisite figures with delight: King Arthur, red-cloaked, armed with his magic sword Excalibur; Queen Guinevere, golden-haired and dressed in white and blue; Sir Lancelot, all in silver armor; Morgan le Fay, an Enchantress (could that be a kind of witch? Harry wondered) with black hair done up very posh on top of her head with a jeweled headdress, wearing a slinky green gown and holding a sparkling wand; and the white-bearded Wizard Merlin, robed in purple, staff in hand, looking ready to cast spells just like Professor Snape! This was a genuine find, and Harry decided that he must devise a way to display the figures properly.

I wonder if wizards in the olden days used bigger wands? The Professor will know. Blimey! Maybe Merlin was real!

He also wondered what Professor Snape would say about the chemistry set on the floor of the closet. It had vials like his potions vials. A lot of the sulfur was gone. Dudley and Piers had experimented with setting fire to it one day, and had made such a stink that Aunt Petunia had almost raised her voice to them. He grinned in memory. For once she had been at a loss, unable to think of any way to blame it all on him.

The suitcase held some of Dudley's winter clothes that Aunt Petunia had not remembered to give away: a rather nice suit in which Dudley had looked like a sausage; thick and wooly scarves; some white dress shirts that Harry eyed speculatively; some heavy winter slacks;

and some jumpers, mostly in horrible colors. Professor Snape could change colors too, he remembered. It was a lot to ask of him, but wasn't it better to fix these things with magic than to waste money?

Harry sorted through the boxes of clothing very soberly, trying to imagine what a wizard would think important. Since the Professor was talking about getting some new clothes and shoes, Harry decided to keep only the best things, and looked longingly again at the leather jacket. He might even have gloves this year.

He worked steadily, forgetting to look at the time, and started when he heard a soft knock at the door. He glanced at the clock. Seven already!

"Potter! Are you awake?" a deep, mellow voice called softly.

"Yes, sir!" Harry instantly opened the door, smiling widely, and then stepped back in confusion when he saw not just the Professor, but what could only be a witch as well!

She was certainly a real witch. She wore robes of green like Morgan le Fay, and she had a tall, conical hat on her head. Straight and stern, she looked about the room unhappily. Then she saw Harry, and her thin face softened into a gentle smile.

"He does have his mother's eyes, " she murmured.

Professor Snape led the witch into the room, shut the door, and said, "Professor McGonagall, this is Harry Potter. Mr Potter, Professor McGonagall will be one of your teachers at Hogwarts. She is here to help us today."

Harry said excitedly. "Happy to meet you, Professor. Your name was on my letter!"

"So it was," she replied. "I was quite pleased to hear that you were going to be joining us this term."

She had a pretty Scots accent. Harry liked the sound of it. He stepped back, and gestured. "I've been working hard on my room since I woke up! Isn't it brilliant?"

Professor McGonagall managed an odd smile, and said tartly, "I'm sure it's a vast improvement on your former lodgings! I was very sorry, Mr Potter, to discover how badly your relatives have treated you. When Professor Snape told me last night what they had been up to, I knew I had to come and help set things right today."

Harry wondered what was going to happen to him. "I really like my room. Do you think the Dursleys will let me keep it? Or will I stay here? Last night," he said to Snape, "you thought that I might go somewhere else."

"Do you want to go somewhere else?" Snape asked, giving the boy an unreadable look.

"I really like my room," Harry repeated, "but the Dursleys are not going to like me having it."

"That is what we are here to discuss, Mr Potter," Minerva assured him.

"You should have some breakfast while we talk, Mr Potter," Snape said. "As long as you can be done before eight, you can make what you like."

"What would you like, Professor?" Harry asked McGonagall politely.

"My dear lad!" she protested, very distressed. "We did not mean--"

Snape said smoothly. "We have already breakfasted at Hogwarts, Mr Potter, but thank you for the invitation."

Harry hurried down the stairs. "Maybe some tea, then?" he asked, glancing back at his visitors.

The two professors looked at each other with expressions that Harry could not interpret. "Tea would be very nice, Mr Potter," said the witch, after a moment.

Harry led them to the spotless, airy kitchen and gestured to the table. "Please take a seat. I won't be long." He hesitated, and then asked Snape, "Are you sure it's all right?"

"Have exactly what you like, Mr Potter," Snape ordered him. "We have a busy day ahead, and you will need all your strength."

Minerva watched, fascinated and rather appalled, as the little boy set about his work with practiced efficiency. There was not a trace of self-important bustling. With great economy of motion, the kettle was on the hob, bread brought out to be toasted, an egg cracked deftly with a single hand, two rashers of bacon set to fry. She looked at Snape rather helplessly. It was all very well for a wizard to be self-sufficient, but the boy's expertise clearly showed that Severus' tale of servitude and exploitation was no more than the truth.

"Milk or lemon for your tea? Harry asked.

"Lemon, please. No sugar."

"For me too, Mr Potter," Snape told him. He noted approvingly that the boy took out a fresh lemon and cut it into thin, identical slices. He'll be a dab hand at preparing potions ingredients. Snape cast a heating charm on the water to set it boiling. The boy lifted his eyebrows in surprise, but had the tea in the strainer--good quality English Breakfast tea--and the cups set out in short order. The pot was rinsed with boiling water first. Snape was very pleased. Potter knew how to brew tea properly. It seemed a good omen.

While that was reaching the perfect strength, the toast popped up, making Minerva jump. Snape smirked at her, and she narrowed her eyes. Harry did not notice, as he was examining the many pots of jam the Dursleys had in stock. He had never tasted any of them. He wondered if he would like orange marmalade or lemon curd better. Or maybe honey? That he had tasted, when Aunt Petunia taught him how to glaze a ham. Plunging into the unknown, he snatched up the

jar of raspberry jam, and then quickly turned the bacon. That done, he began filling a glass of water from the tap for himself.

Snape cleared his throat. "Mr Potter, perhaps you might consider milk or juice rather than plain water. I also have a potion for you to drink when you sit down."

"Sorry, sir," Harry apologised. "The milk and juice are just for the Dursleys."

"Today they are for you," Snape declared.

This required another decision, and Harry opted for orange juice, which he thought would be tasty with the crisp saltiness of the bacon. He filled the glass, and then took a look at the tea. It seemed just right, and he served his professors with a certain pride. He had never played host before, but he had seen his aunt and uncle do it many times.

"You're sure you wouldn't care for some toast, at least?" he asked.

"Just tea, " Minerva replied gently.

Snape's gesture told Harry that he should see to his own breakfast. It seemed odd, making such a meal only for himself, but once on his plate it looked very appetizing. He waited for them to try their tea. It was never a good idea to take the first bite at this table. Another glass was at his place, filled with a milky blue liquid.

Minerva saw him waiting, and sipped from her cup. "This is delicious, Mr Potter. Thank you."

"Yes, well done. Now drink your potion and then tuck in," Snape said brusquely. "You eat, and we'll tell you what came of our meeting with the Headmaster last night."

Harry quaffed down the potion obediently. It tasted odd, and rather nasty, but he supposed medicine was supposed to taste like that. Then he ate his breakfast, trying to mind his manners. It was a little

unnerving to have a hearty meal while grownups watched him. He kept his eyes on his plate, and found it was less worrying that way.

Snape began. "Mr Potter, you will remember that yesterday I told you that the fact you survived the Killing Curse had made you rather famous in the wizarding world. There are any number of witches and wizards who would be eager to obtain custody of you."

Harry looked up, surprised but a little wary. Who would want him?

"However," Snape continued, "it's all very mixed up with politics. If it were known that you were no longer living with your family, there might be legal battles over you, and some of the participants might not want what is best for you, but want to make use you and your fame for their own ends."

Harry made a face. That didn't sound so good. He bit into the jam-laden toast, and found it was as delicious as he had imagined.

Professor McGonagall put in, "Obviously, we do not want that to happen to you. We discussed placing you with some nice people we know, or even having you come to live year-round at Hogwarts, but that would be contested by anyone related to you."

"I have other relatives?" Harry said, his eyes brightening.

Snape answered, rather sourly. "The wizarding world is small, Mr Potter. Nearly everyone is related, one way or another. In your case, none very closely, because the Potters were only sons for three generations, but any relationship counts among us. As you know, simply being related by blood does not ensure kind treatment. Some of your relatives are decent people, and some are not. If it went before the Wizengamot, we have no guarantee that you would find yourself any better off than you are now."

Harry nodded, rather resigned to his fate with the Dursleys. He only hoped he would not have to give up his room!

Snape grunted, "Professor McGonagall had an idea that would keep you here, technically under your family's roof, but safe from interference by them."

Minerva took another sip of the excellent tea, and laid out the plan. "You will have almost no contact with the Dursleys from this day on, Mr Potter. Perhaps no contact at all, really. We will see that your room is made very comfortable, and you will have no need to step out into the part of the house where the Dursleys live. We will see to it that they do not trouble you."

Harry was worried. "What about--you know--the bathroom? And meals? How will I eat? Will I be locked up in my room until school starts?"

"Of course not!" Minerva was scandalised. "Naturally, you're right to be concerned about such things, but we have thought it through carefully. You'll have your own bathroom. We'll put it in today--"

Harry's eyes widened. "I'll have an ensuite! Wicked!"

McGonagall looked at him reprovingly for interrupting her.

"Sorry, Professor, but that's really great."

"I am glad you approve. Your meals will be brought to you three times a day from Hogwarts by one of the kitchen elves."

Harry bit his lip, not wanting to interrupt, but wondering what a kitchen elf might be. Snape saw the question in the green eyes.

"House elves are small magical creatures who serve witches and wizards, Mr Potter. They live to cook and clean, and they have remarkable powers of their own. Hogwarts has a large staff of such elves in the kitchens. The Headmaster has agreed to assign one to you, who will serve your meals, clean your room, and do your laundry. You will be able to concentrate on your studies without distractions."

Seeing Harry's face, McGonagall reassured him. "They are very kind and friendly beings, Mr. Potter. They will consider it quite an honor.

They can also carry messages, if you have any problems or concerns. We, of course, will be back and forth frequently from now until the start of term."

"I do like my room," Harry told them. "And having my own bathroom and regular meals will be great." Bravely, he said, "I have lots of books and things to do in my room. I'll be fine staying there for the next month, really."

Impatiently, Snape growled, "Don't play the martyr, Potter! You and I will be out to the shops any number of times, and Professor McGonagall here believes it to be a good idea for you to have your own entrance to the house. You may come and go as you please, as long as you're sensible. If you're not, we will lock you up until the start of term!"

The thought of all this was dizzying. "My own door? How will you do that?"

Snape gave him an exasperated look. "How do you think? With magic."

"Am I allowed to watch?"

"Why not?" Snape asked. "You just may learn something."

"The time, Severus," Minerva said warningly.

"Thank you. Now, Mr Potter, your relations will be awakening presently from their beauty sleep." He smirked at Harry's laugh. "When we arrived, Professor McGonagall and I took pictures of your cupboard as evidence against them. Remove anything you plan to keep, and then the cupboard will be sealed, and your relatives will never think of it again. No, don't worry about the washing up. I'll deal with your family, while you and Professor McGonagall begin work to improve your room. I'll send your uncle to his place of business and your cousin out to terrorise the neighbors. Your aunt and I may need to undertake some errands this morning. After I've finished with your relatives, I'll go out again and get the items necessary for your new bathroom and entrance."

There was really very little of value left in the cupboard. Harry retrieved his books and his action figures. A picture he had drawn of a flying motorcycle (his teacher had written, "You have a wonderful imagination!" on it) was carefully detached from the wall. The clothes he hoped never to see again. The fish still lay on the carpet, eyes sunken, looking very past its prime. It was beginning to stink horribly.

Minerva was amused at the sight, and told Harry, "A shotgun into a salmon. An excellent example of the art of Transfiguration. I am proud to tell you that I taught Professor Snape, when he was no older than you. I taught your parents, too. Your father had a rare talent for Transfiguration, which I hope you share. It is a difficult and dangerous subject, but infinitely useful. What Professor Snape did last night somewhat resembles the very first lesson you will be learning, which is how to turn matchsticks into needles."

Harry frowned.

"I can see you are wondering what the point of the exercise is. It is easier to transfigure things that resemble one another. We start small, and then apply those lessons to larger and more complicated items."

That made sense. Harry nodded. As they went upstairs, he said to Professor McGonagall. "Magic is pretty amazing."

"Mr Potter, you don't know the half of it."

Chapter 10

Rancid air hung heavy in the bedroom. Vernon Dursley lay sprawled on his back, mouth open, snoring like a dragon. Petunia was curled on her side, her face etched with anxious dissatisfaction, even in sleep. Snape regarded the pair with revulsion. There were many situations in which potions were superior to charms. Most sleeping potions would assist an individual in finding rest, or minimize the body's functions to permit long-term sleep. Snape had had none of those potions on his person last night, and thus had had to resort to a Morpheus charm.

The charm was effective, but forced sleep on the individual, ignoring all other signals from the body. After twelve hours, the Dursleys' mattress was sodden with voided urine. Well, that was easily dealt with.

They would awaken at any moment. Snape listened briefly to the excited young voice talking with Minerva in the bedroom down the hall, and turned to the subjects before him. The potion he would use on them was perfectly legal, but only because the Ministry did not know it existed. Snape had created it long ago, when his views were somewhat different than they were now. It had a mild affect on witches and witches, but the impact on muggles was overwhelming. It had made dealing with his father in the elder Snape's last years bearable. He felt no remorse at using it on the Dursleys. It certainly would interfere with the exercise of their Free Will, but that was all to the good, as far as he was concerned. A sentence to Azkaban or a muggle prison also interfered with one's Free Will, as did the possession of a conscience. Since the Dursleys had no conscience whatever where it concerned Harry Potter, Snape felt he had every right to directly dictate changes in their behavior. A night's sleep had not cooled his anger. He had decided that, among other things, they should repay more of the boy's money. He would tell Minerva a story about a mild compulsion charm. As to Dumbledore, Snape was not pleased with him. What he did here was none of Dumbledore's business, and he would take care to see that Dumbledore knew as little as possible. He produced an atomizer, and sprayed the potion directly up the Dursleys' nostrils, careful not to breathe it in himself.

It did not act exactly like the Imperius Curse, but rendered the subject submissive and suggestible for at least half a day. Ideas and memories would remain permanently. After allowing ten seconds for the potion to do its work, he put the atomizer away, and cast a "Finite" on them.

"It is perfectly normal for me to be here, and you will listen to me and obey me. Petunia is going to give Harry Potter five hundred pounds for clothing and spending money. That is a good idea, and when either of you see the account records, you will think it was the least you could do for him. You will not think about Harry anymore, or ask him to do anything for you, or try to enter the cupboard under the stairs. You will not try to open the door of his room, and in fact you will not even see it. Harry Potter is not your problem. If anyone asks you about him, you will say that you've had a bit of luck with the boy. It turns out his parents paid his expenses to their old school, and he'll be gone most of the year. A good thing all around. Maybe they'll make something of him at that school of his. You will say that it's called Stornaway School. That is the public name of Hogwarts, by the way, and it has a good reputation. Then you will change the subject. You will never say the actual name of Hogwarts, of course, and you will never mention magic or talk about freaks. The boy goes to school on the first of September. On that date, Vernon will not go to work until after lunch, because you are supposed to take Harry to King's Cross for the morning train. You will not actually take him there, because someone else will take him, but that is the story you will tell people. After that date, you will tell anyone who asks that you've heard he's doing well. During the summer when he is home, you will tell anyone who asks that you don't see much of him. He likes to get his own meals, and he's always studying or meeting friends from his school.

"You, Vernon, will get up, clean yourself, and go to work as usual today. You will not notice Harry or me or any strangers. You will not have breakfast. You could stand to lose a stone or two. Petunia--sit there quietly until I return."

He entered Dudley's room. The smell was even fouler here. After administering the potion spray, he said, "Dudley, it is perfectly normal for me to be here, and you will listen to me and obey me. Sit here

until your father is finished in the bathroom. Then open your window, shower, and dress in clean clothes. Then go out for a good long walk of at least an hour. You will not have breakfast today. You could stand to lose a stone or two. Perhaps you should eat more fruits and vegetables, and fewer sweets and fatty foods. Perhaps you should make an effort at your new school. You shouldn't bully other people. If your mother asks you to help her with the house or garden, you will do as you are asked. You will not think about Harry anymore. If anyone asks you about him, you'll tell them that he's going to his parents' old school, and during the summer holidays in the future you will say that he spends all his time studying or seeing his school friends. You will not call him a freak, or insult his parents. You will not like it when your friends do it, and you will tell them you don't like it, and that you've decided to grow up. Then you will change the subject. You won't remember about magic or about my visit last night. Today if you see me or Harry or any other strangers in the house, you will not notice us. You will not try to enter the cupboard under the stairs. You will not remember about your second bedroom or anything left in it. You will not even notice the door."

Snape had no idea what the effect of his suggestions prefaced with "Perhaps-" would have on the boy in the long term. He wondered if he should feel guilty, but decided not to be. His words would give the boy a kind of artificial conscience, something like the ethical restraints that his parents should have instilled in him over the years. It might be interesting to have a look later, and see what actually took place.

While Vernon, and then Dudley, showered and took their leave, Snape looked in to see how Minerva was faring with the boy.

"Professor Snape!" Harry nearly shouted, eager to show him the changes. Snape noted that his fresh clothing now fit him. "Look at my new desk! Professor McGonagall can make furniture out of cardboard boxes!" He explained helpfully, "Cardboard comes from trees, too, so it's easier to transfigure it permanently into things made of wood than if you used plastic or other stuff that's not related."

Snape blinked. "Very impressive. You're a lucky boy, Mr Potter, to have a Transfiguration Mistress do your redecorating."

There was a polished desk of dark oak pushed under the wide-open window. The legs and edges were carved with a barley twist motif. The top of the desk was covered with dark red leather, as was the seat of the matching chair. The globe he remembered as broken last night was repaired and set neatly to one side. An elaborate brass inkstand was ready to be filled. Minerva was smiling smugly.

"I think it will do nicely," she agreed. "Mr Potter, put your quills away--yes, there. The ink is poured in there. Parchment here, your planner--a good idea--yes, just over there. A bookcase next, I believe. Where would you like it?"

A broken box was very soon a tall, handsome bookcase--also of oak. It stood against the wall opposite the window, near the door. The bottom of it was enclosed with cupboard doors, to keep the hoard of toys tidy. Instantly the boy began arranging his books and small treasures. Minerva sat in the elegant desk chair, watching the boy with dry amusement.

"While you are being brilliant," Snape remarked acidly, "please do something about that." He pointed to the lamp. Minerva shuddered. Snape added, "Nothing to the working bits, of course, since the boy will need to use it, but something about the appearance, certainly."

Minerva cocked her head, studying it. Before she could wave her wand, however, there was a flutter outside, and the bushes rustled with the weight of a tawny owl.

Snape remembered the multitude of spells he had cast since yesterday, and all but slapped his head with horror. What if the boy were blamed? "Bloody hell! Is it the Misuse of Magic Office?"

Minerva waved the bird in and removed the message. "Calm down, Severus. Mafalda Hopkirk is an old friend of mine. When you stormed out of Hogwarts yesterday, I sent her an owl telling her that Hogwarts staff would be in and out of Mr Potter's house until the beginning of term." She looked over the note. "Yes--she understands that any magic done here is being done by qualified adults."

Harry watched it all in amazement. Shyly, he approached the owl, stretching out his hand. "Owls deliver messages? That's fantastic! I have got to get myself one!"

"An excellent idea, Mr Potter," Minerva answered absently, as she unfolded another piece of paper from the message.

Snape was considering the situation. In effect, Minerva had just removed the Trace from the boy's wand. It would make it much easier to get the boy acclimated to his studies now.

Minerva handed the attachment to him. "Fill in your name--here. You need to have Mrs Dursley sign this."

"What is it?" Snape looked it over. It was a standard Ministry form, but one he had never seen before.

"If she signs it, it will name you her proxy for Mr Potter's contacts with the wizarding world. You'll act as her deputy guardian while he is at school, and for situations involving magic."

Harry looked up hopefully. Snape was puzzled.

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"It's not often done," Minerva allowed. "In fact, not for years. I asked Mafalda to track the form down for me." Turning to Harry, she said, "Years ago, Mr Potter, when I was a young student, there was a boy at Hogwarts who lived in an orphanage. While we permit muggle families of students to know about magic, an institution cannot be permitted the same rights. We send grade reports to your guardian, and ask them to sign permission forms, and contact them if you are injured. Obviously, we couldn't send a grade report for things like Charms and Potions to the head of a muggle orphanage, who might well be replaced at any time. Therefore, one of the boy's professors became proxy guardian for magical affairs."

"His Head of House?" Snape asked.

"Actually, Albus was his proxy. The boy was not a Gryffindor, but Albus had been his first contact in the wizarding world."

"Why not Albus again? He's the Headmaster." Snape looked away from the hurt disappointment on Harry's face. He continued, "He would undoubtedly consider it his prerogative."

Minerva shook her head. "I don't think so. You know what we discussed last night? Others might want to be Mr. Potter's proxy, but you're in a unique position. No other witch or wizard was Lily and Petunia Evans' childhood neighbor and playmate. It makes perfect sense, especially to people who really don't know the truth of the situation. No one will think to question it."

Snape stood mulling it over, and Harry felt hopeful again. He stroked the owl's soft feathers, and received a gentle nip in return. Smiling, he remembered the beautiful white owl in the shop. Perhaps it was still for sale.

"Well, Mr Potter," Snape asked. "What do you think about this? Be warned: if I am in charge of your dealings with the wizarding world, I will expect exemplary grades and sterling conduct."

"You'll be seeing my grades instead of Aunt Petunia?"

"Exactly. It probably is for the best that the Dursleys not receive owls from us. I'm planning on altering your family's memories so that they will almost never even think of you, much less think of bothering you. Even if Petunia were well-disposed towards you, I believe a wizard would be of more use to you in guiding your studies."

"I think so too!" Harry agreed, relieved. "It would be great if you'd be my guardian."

Snape corrected him carefully. "I won't be your legal guardian, Mr Potter. Just the proxy. If people ever ask you who your guardian is, you must tell them that it is your Aunt Petunia. If they press you, you can tell them that she appointed me to be her proxy for magical affairs because we have known each other all our lives. It's stretching the truth, but it will keep other people from trying to get hold of you."

He strode down the hall and presented the form to a tractable Petunia for her signature. He signed it as well, and returned to find Harry still admiring the tawny owl. The boy watched, fascinated, as Snape demonstrated how to fasten a message and direct an owl.

The boy told McGonagall, "When we were at Diagon Alley, I saw this white owl. It was gorgeous. I hope it's still there when I go back to get my boots."

"I hope so too, Mr Potter," the witch replied kindly. "Now back to the matter at hand. What do you think a lamp should look like?"

Snape left them to it, realizing that this morning the boy would learn more about the principles of Transfiguration than most pureblooded children learned in their entire childhoods. He stopped by Dudley's room to cast a "Scourgify" and then a drying charm on the bed. He did likewise in Petunia's room. Then it was time to take Petunia out on their errands. This was going to be much more complicated.

He sent her off to shower and change, telling her that they were going to the bank today, and she would need to dress appropriately, and bring all the papers about Harry's benefits. With a sniff, he instructed her to behave politely to everyone, including himself, and to speak of the boy as "Harry."

Snape disliked being seen on the street with Petunia Evans Dursley. He had never liked her from the day they met, and there was something wrong about walking beside her. Twice they ran into acquaintances of Petunia's, and Snape had to describe himself as an "old friend of the family," while enduring Petunia's smiling acquiescence. No one seemed to find anything inappropriate about seeing the two of them together, which Snape found perversely irritating.

He had decided that it would be best to set up Harry's account at a different bank than the one the Dursleys patronised. The five hundred pounds that would be the initial deposit was withdrawn from the Dursleys' account and then taken to another bank. With a little mental pressure, Snape was able to have the account set up in Harry's name

with both Petunia and Snape himself shown as custodians. The child benefit and guardian's allowance would be deposited directly into the account in future. All statements would be sent to Snape's muggle address. Snape forced himself to smile and respond pleasantly to the bank clerk's silly small talk. He would have to return here from time to time, and did not want to attract unwanted notice or incur any hostility. Petunia, under the influence of the potion, was uncommonly docile and accommodating. When she was not being horrid her face relaxed, and she did not look so entirely unworthy of being Lily Evans' sister.

On the way back to Privet Drive, Snape had another surprise. Walking at some distance ahead of them was a woman he believed he knew: a squib named Arabella Figg. Snape remembered that she had run errands for Albus during the war. She had learned to fit in among the muggles quite well, but Snape wondered what she was doing in the neighborhood.

Only for a moment. Instantly, he realized that she must be here on Albus' business. Quietly, he asked Petunia, "Do you know that woman over there?"

Pleasantly, Petunia answered, "Mrs Figg. A little odd, but quite useful. She often looks after Harry when we want to go out with Dudders."

"How long has she lived here?"

"Oh--nearly as long as we have. I believe she took the house on Wisteria Walk not long after Harry came to us."

"I see."

He did. Albus knows everything, the twinkling old spider. The woman was placed in the neighborhood in order to report to him. What exactly did she tell him? Snape decided a discreet interview with Arabella Figg would be desirable.

That would come later, however. He led Petunia back to Privet Drive, and sat with her for over an hour, listening in as she dealt with a bureaucrat over the telephone about the boy's benefits and the bank

account. When all was settled, and she hung up the receiver, Snape had her look at the address he had written.

He said, "Whenever you receive any correspondence about Harry, whether from the government or elsewhere, you will forward it to me immediately to this address, and then you will forget about it. I will deal with Harry's affairs. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she answered obediently.

"So glad," Snape muttered. Aloud he said, "And if Harry's Aunt Marge comes for a visit, you will send me a note to the same address, telling me the dates." Snape knew that eventually he would have to deal with Vernon's sister, who seemed to have known and collaborated in the boy's abuse. "Then you will forget about it. Clear?"

She nodded.

"Very well, Petunia, we're done here. You will take up your usual housework. You will not notice Harry or me or anyone else about the house. You will have to work somewhat harder, of course, now that you don't have your nephew to help you. If things become too difficult, you should ask darling Dudders to help you. It's so important for a boy to know how to take care of himself. Teaching him how to do house and garden work is really for his own good, and it's your duty to teach him. If necessary, you'll have to persuade Vernon, but you know that right is on your side." Her bland lack of response annoyed him. He hissed, "Are you aware that Vernon and Dudley are dangerously obese?"

"Yes." It was said with perfect calm.

"Don't you care if they die young?"

"Not very much. Vernon is so disgusting. I hate his sister Marge. If he died, I wouldn't have to see her anymore."

"What about your son? Isn't he worth any effort on your part?"

In the same unnervingly calm voice, she complained, "It's so hard to get him to do anything. I'd rather not be bothered. Harry did everything so well, after all."

"No more Harry, Petunia. Not ever again. Now listen to me. You are going to take Dudley to a doctor, and you will follow the doctor's advice. If Vernon objects, you should make an appointment for him, too. They both could stand to lose a few stone. And you can't keep covering up for Dudley's bullying and bad behavior. Find him some sort of sport or class to take up in the summer holidays in future. Take him there yourself if you must. And starting today, you will tell him that you expect him to make good grades at school and to behave like a gentleman. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

Snape blew out a breath, and slumped back on the sofa beside Petunia, wondering why he was bothering. Was it because he believed it would have pleased Lily? Would it have pleased her, in fact? Lily could be very hard on people who disappointed her, as he knew too well. One wrong word, uttered in a moment of panic, had estranged him from her forever, with no hope of mercy or forgiveness. He had heard gossip that she had not attended Petunia's wedding, after some sort of row at her own. It was entirely possible that Lily would have thought the Dursleys deserved one another. She was not very understanding of people who caused their own problems. He smirked, remembering the things she had said to Black when she caught him with a cigarette. And she had despised Snape's father for his drinking. Less vocally, she had let Snape understand how much she despised her own father for the same failing. No one had seen her at her parents' funeral. Perhaps she was too angry to go. Snape took a quick breath, suddenly grasping where the germ of Petunia's vicious story of her sister's drunken "car crash" had come from--the horrible accident that had killed the elder Evanses in the spring of '81. Lily and Petunia were sisters, after all, and there was a certain resembl--No. Such thoughts were disloyal, and he put them aside.

He took comfort in the reflection that there were sound reasons for what he was doing. The Dursleys were bound to attract attention eventually by their aggressive, ridiculous attempts to prove

themselves normal. Their behavior was so pathological that it must end in Dudley or Vernon arrested, or Petunia going off the deep end and murdering them, or fed-up neighbors burning the house down over their heads. It was all too probable that one day someone would take note of their abuse of their nephew, and then the muggle police would be involved, and Dumbledore's carefully crafted plan to hide the boy would collapse like a house of cards. Ultimately, the best way for the Dursleys to escape scrutiny was to scrap their deranged pretense of normality and exchange it for the real thing. Besides, if Vernon or Dudley suffered a catastrophic illness while Harry was still in school, it might disrupt life at Privet Drive, and call for further, more complicated interference. The house, he gathered, was not yet paid for, and the loss of Vernon's income would require a change of address. This would inconvenience his own plans for Harry Potter.

Of course, he smiled nastily to himself, he might have put the cat among the pigeons with the ideas he had planted in Petunia and Dudley's heads. Suggestions made under the influence of his potion could only do so much to affect general behavior, and might affect different individuals in different ways. Oh--he had no doubt that they would obey specific orders, but something as vague as "do better in school?" It would be interesting to see what came of it. It was time to be on his way, and do the necessary shopping for alterations to the boy's room.

Still, there was still one thing left he wanted from Petunia.

"Tell me all about what happened at Lily's wedding."

Harry admired his new bed. It was both incredibly posh and incredibly comfortable. He had explained to Professor McGonagall about feeling uneasy in such an open space. She had responded by transfiguring his plain single bed into a curtained oak four-poster, complete with canopy. It was still a single bed in size, but the most gorgeous he had ever seen.

"You will find the beds at Hogwarts very similar," he was told.

It was very cozy, when he drew the bedcurtains. He popped out again, and thanked her profusely. He thanked her yet again when she improved the ugly chest of drawers into something bigger and finer: carved dark oak which matched the desk and bed. He had two spare chairs for his visitors, and she had left some space between the chest of drawers and the door, because she told him he would want a place for his Hogwarts trunk.

The lamp had changed shape and color many times. In its final form, it was a handsome desk lamp: white, sprinkled with Snitches and Quaffles and Beaters Bats, all in gold. It was shaded with a dome of warm amber glass. Professor McGonagall loved Quidditch, and had played on the Gryffindor house team as a Chaser. She knew even more about it than Professor Snape. Harry liked his lamp, and felt it gave a properly magical touch to his room.

The walls were left white-- not that there was much to be seen of them with the tall furniture and the two doors and the window. The door to the closet was opposite the window, just after the bookcase when one entered the room from the hall. The bed fit into the far corner of the room. The foot of it was only three feet from the closet.

"Yes." Minerva surveyed the room carefully. "That will do. Your bed lies against the outer wall of the house. In that space between the foot of the bed and the closet, we'll put your private entrance." She gave a sharp, pleased nod, and then asked, "Have you decided on a colour for the curtains yet?"

The curtains had begun as brown, and then evolved into a kind of russet, and then into a dark blue. Harry sorted through his paints and crayons until he found what he liked best. In short order, the window curtains, the bedcurtains, the cushions of the two spare chairs, and a soft woolly rug made from a ragged jumper were a radiant turquoise.

"Maybe a little darker," Harry suggested. They amused themselves, adding a little more green, or a little more blue, or darkening it, or lightening it, until it was perfect: soothing, but neither gloomy nor girly. Harry stroked the velvet of his bedcurtains and duvet, and was more than satisfied.

"Best Room in the World" was his verdict. "Thank you so much, Professor."

"You're very welcome, Mr Potter," Minerva smiled, considering her work. She did not think of herself as one who needlessly coddled children, but Harry had had a wretched life, and it was a kind of catharsis to be able to put some of it right for him, even if only with material goods. She studied the bare walls, and remembered something from her own childhood. "Perhaps a little plain--" she decided.

She lifted her wand once more, and a pattern began emerging, a border of black symbols near the top of the white wall.

"What are those, Professor?" Harry wondered.

"Runes," Minerva replied. "You can do all sorts of magic with runes: Rituals, wards, Symbolic Magic. They can reveal one's true nature and give clues about one's destiny. Real, solid, good old-fashioned magic--not like that tea leaf rubbish in Divina--" She stopped herself, self-consciously, "Well, that's neither here nor there. Before we used wands much here in Britain, there were Runes and Ogham and Dalriadan script. This first set is Old Futhark. Next is Young Futhark. Here is Ogham." The black symbols marched on, neat and uniform. "Next I think I'll write the Greek alphabet, and then the Egyptian hieroglyphics. I shan't bother with the Latin alphabet, since you know it already of course, and the magic in it has mostly dissipated over time." She sighed. "Too much rubbish written in it. Too many muggles using it. It still tells one things, and it can persuade, but much of the magic is gone. However," she told him, "Take Young Futhark here. There's a lot of power in these Runes. Would you like to see your name written in Runes, Mr Potter?"

Harry grinned in response, enjoying the experience of anyone being interested in himself and his name. The symbols did not make much sense to him--the "H" of Harry looked like something between an "N" and an "H," but Professor McGonagall seemed to be very struck by the letters for some reason.

Minerva was indeed startled by what she saw. Neither Lily nor James had studied Runes. Magic had fashions, like everything else, and in their day Runes had been considered "irrelevant." Everyone in their set was all for Astronomy--perhaps because of poor Remus Lupin's problem--and Care of Magical Creatures. Lily likely had never seen her child's name in this old tongue, and had never seen what Minerva now did.

Oh, my. Power and magic and prophecy. The doubled Tyr for the warrior path and the doubled Raido for a journey. Property--an inheritance? Ordeals and hindrances. Well, that's certainly true. Another Raido. The Runes quivered and blended, and then grew clearer. No mere journey, then. An heroic quest. He's such a little boy! Albus is not telling me everything. Really! Harry's adventures did not end the night of Voldemort's disappearance. They've scarcely begun!

Thinking of the house wards gave her a new idea. She shook her head to clear it, and asked briskly, "Would you like to learn to do some real magic of your own today?"

A.N.--Once again, thank you all for your support. I wrote most of this last summer, and your interest has given me the energy to continue! Until next Sunday, then!

Chapter 11

By the time Snape had returned from Magical Home and Garden, it was noon. He popped back to Privet Drive with his purchases, and was baffled when he attempted to open young Potter's door, and could not.

"Alohamora!" he incanted, waving his wand at the door. The door remained obstinately closed.

"Is that you, Professor?" the boy called out from within.

"Of course it's me," Snape growled. "Were you expecting Merlin?"

The door was flung open, and the boy was there, green eyes bright as ever his mother's had been, a huge grin on his face. "It worked! Come in, sir."

Minerva was sitting in the middle of the room, at a small table set for three. "Of course it worked, Mr Potter. You cast the ward very nicely."

"Wards?" Snape raised a brow at Minerva. "You've been letting the boy use his wand? I'm shocked, shocked to find rule-breaking going on in here!"

Harry could hardly hold in his delight. "I didn't use my wand! Professor McGonagall's been teaching me how to cast a ward by carving runes! And I did it!"

Snape frowned and set down his packages. He was no expert in runic wardings, but he knew the symbols must be somewhere--

Harry grinned even more broadly and pointed to the doorsill. Snape squinted, and bent to look. Sure enough, three little runes were scratched into the wood--very unobtrusively. He might never have noticed, had they not been pointed out to him. With the door shut, they were invisible. "How sly and cunning of you," he remarked--more to taunt Minerva than to tease the boy.

Minerva only laughed. "One can't be too careful. Sit down with us, Severus. Muffy, you may serve the luncheon now."

A little house elf appeared, bearing a heavy, fragrant tray. In a flash, food was before them, and the elf was gone. Harry beamed at Snape. "That's Muffy! She's brilliant! I told her everything I like to eat--"

Minerva added dryly, "--and I told her everything you ought to eat."

Harry blushed, and subsided, still smiling. "I like everything, anyway." He fidgeted, eyes on his glass of milk and his plate of sandwiches and fruit salad.

After a morning of Petunia and muggle functionaries, not to mention his visit to the home repair shop, Snape was glad of the meal. He saw the boy watching him furtively, green eyes veiled by his thick black eyelashes. Minerva noticed, too, and smiled quietly to herself, her spoon dipping neatly into her Scotch Broth. Minerva always ate lightly in the middle of the day--nearly always soup.

Snape made a careful show of unfolding the napery, choosing the appropriate utensil, holding it correctly, and eating with a minimum of noise. After a moment, the boy followed suit, correcting his grip on his own fork. Snape wondered if the boy had been allowed to eat with his family. Even if he had, Petunia probably would not have bothered to teach nice manners to a "freak."

While they ate, Snape brought up their next project. "If you have the time, Professor McGonagall, I thought we might create the bathroom next."

She smiled. "I am quite at your disposal, Professor Snape."

After thinking it over, Harry asked, "Where are you going to put a bathroom? The room's pretty full already."

"We're going to expand your closet, Mr Potter," Snape told him. "It is usually possible to expand space magically to some degree. We will enlarge your closet, and use most of the space for your bathroom fixtures. Other than the lavatory and toilet, you'll only have a shower. I

don't think the muggles produce enough hot water to make a tub satisfactory for you."

"A shower would be great! But don't you need special wizard workmen to do that? If Uncle Vernon needed another bathroom, he'd have to hire someone."

Snape nodded, "Ordinarily, one would hire a wizarding builder. However, that would compromise your location, and besides, I've put in a bathroom before."

"Professor Snape is a man of many talents," Minerva observed drolly.

Giving her a look, Snape decided to tell the truth. "When I was a boy, Mr Potter, I also lived in a muggle house. We were poor, and we didn't have a bathroom at all. There was a common wash house in back for everyone in our street. I can see from your expression that you don't think that was very pleasant. It wasn't. One of the first things I did when I was of age was put a bathroom in my house. I had little money to spare, and I learned how to do it by myself."

The boy did not look scornful. His expression was openly admiring, in fact. "That was really clever of you, sir."

"I'm sure you understand why you must never tell this story to anyone else."

"I won't, sir. I promise," Harry said earnestly. "I know how rotten people can be when they think somebody is poor."

They talked more generally: about the room's improved furniture; the value, both educational and aesthetic, of the runic wall border; and about some of Dudley's leftover possessions, which were now Harry's.

"I have a set of hieroglyphic stamps. They came with a little book and everything. Dudley thought they were stupid, but since they're another kind of rune, I'm going to keep them."

"They're a very nice study aid, Mr Potter," Minerva told him, "but if you are using them for magic, it's better to write them yourself."

"Or carve them," Harry said thoughtfully, remembering the morning's lesson.

"Exactly."

"Just how strong is that ward?" Snape asked Minerva.

"Quite strong, in fact. Fairly simple, but powerful all the same. Unless one knows that the runes are there, it would require great power to get past the ward, because ordinary charms won't work against it. Mr Potter made a promise to me," she said sternly, "that he won't teach it to anyone else."

Harry nodded agreeably, and then grinned. He told Snape. "When Professor McGonagall was a student, she heard about some boys years before who used it to ward all the girls' toilets. They had to threaten to send everyone home to make the boys confess and tell them how to get in, and then they had to replace the doors and door frames. So now all the students have to make a vow not to use it for pranks or tell any of their friends about it."

Snape raised a brow, somewhat impressed. No one had in fact ever told him about such a ward. "How did the elf get in, then? Does the ward not bar elves?"

Minerva smiled in a very superior way. "It does, but Mr Potter gave her the freedom of his threshold, as he did me."

Harry hastily swallowed a bite. "And I will you too, sir, but Professor McGonagall and I wanted to surprise you first."

Snape snorted, rather amused. "When we add your new entrance, you must ward that as well."

"I won't forget, sir." Harry's attention was diverted by his plate. "Strawberries are very good," he remarked, like a researcher announcing a new discovery.

Snape and McGonagall exchanged a glance.

The stabilising charms were no challenge to a witch of Minerva's calibre. Snape admitted to himself that it was a great help to have another wand when doing this kind of work. He had reviewed the necessary charms before casting, and found it all rather enjoyable.

The closet was completely emptied, and then the space was rotated inwards 90 degrees, using as the axis the front corner nearest the hall door. It was a small closet: only six feet wide and two deep, but the closet proper was now in a new wizarding space. A square six feet by six feet was available for the bathroom. The closet light was left in place. Self-replicating tiles for ceiling, floor, and walls were up in minutes.

The boy watched in delight as a single wall tile copied itself over and over, covering the walls--and then all the tiles adjusted their size at once, fitting the space perfectly. The ceiling tiles were up, and adjusted themselves, and became an expanse of flawless white plaster. Harry read the wrappings, studying the charms.

"Could I keep these?" he asked.

"If you like." Snape was studying the little room, deciding where to place the fixtures.

"Did this cost a lot of money?" Harry asked, looking at the triangular shower stall that Professor Snape was enlarging to its normal size in the far corner.

"It's nothing for you to worry about," Minerva told him. "Consider it a present."

"But--"

Snape straightened, and said, in a voice that closed discussion, "Your parents contributed a great deal of their money to the war against the Dark Lord, Mr Potter. We discovered that a little of that money was left. It is only fair that you get some benefit from it."

He flicked a look at Minerva, who studied the ceiling with great composure. Plenty had been said at last night's conference. In the end, Albus had not proved impossible to persuade. If he absolutely insisted that the boy remain under this roof, he understood that he must pay a price for both his professors' cooperation.

Not that The Order of Phoenix was especially flush with funds. Snape reveled in bitter satisfaction, in pleased contempt, whenever he thought of how James Potter had squandered his child's inheritance. Minerva had been fond of Potter, and made excuses for him: his youth, his father's premature death and failure to teach his son about estate management, the desperate needs of the war.

Snape smiled quietly, knowing all the excuses were rubbish. James Potter, the Golden Boy of Gryffindor, was a bad father who had compromised his orphaned child's prospects. Whatever steps he had taken to keep his family safe had been pitifully inadequate. He had staked everything on his best friend, who proved a traitor. He was dead, and his stupid arrogance had killed Lily and would have killed the boy, save for a magical anomaly. He had left his child without protection, without a home, without reasonable provisions for his future. The money remaining at Gringotts was there only because Potter had not lived to spend that too. Plenty of families had opposed the Dark Lord, but they had not sacrificed their children to the struggle. The Longbottoms had suffered, but still lived at Longbottom Lodge. The Weasleys were ardent Dumbledore loyalists, but Molly would never consider allowing Arthur to sell--or lease--the Burrow. In fact, if the Potters had stayed at their ancestral manor, they might well have been safe behind hundreds of years of--genuine--blood wards. The estate he knew, was Unplottable, and they might have hidden there forever, safe on the grounds of the estate, even if the Dark Lord held sway over all England.

He wondered if Dumbledore had suggested the lease to them. He knew the old man was ruthless when in pursuit of a larger goal. And he had to admit that there was some slight excuse for them. James and Lily had been very young, and naturally followed their mentor's lead. Lily had had little patience with pureblood pretensions and the emphasis on landed property. It did not excuse Potter to the same

degree, Snape felt. Leasing an ancestral property away from one's own child was cause sufficient to earn the name of Blood-Traitor. Snape sneered. Here he was, doing more for Potter's child than the idiot had ever done himself. He, Severus Snape, was more a father to the boy than that foolish, careless--

"Doesn't that need a pipe or a drain or something?" the boy was asking him, looking curiously at the bowl of the toilet.

"No. It's charmed to vanish the contents."

Snape charmed it in place, and then charmed up some racks for towels, and a mirrored cupboard above the lavatory.

"Where do things go when they're vanished?" Harry wondered.

Snape scowled at Minerva, who was smiling knowingly at him. She had used some old grey socks to make fluffy towels in the same shade of bluish green the boy favored.

"These particular charms send vanished material to the interior of Stromboli, a volcano off the coast of Sicily. It is immediately incinerated there. Look for it tonight on that globe of yours."

"Cool. What are those?" Harry asked, pointed at some long flexible tubes.

"These, Mr Potter," Snape told him patiently, "are your pipes. I attach them to the shower. So--and---so. When I pronounce the charm for this one, it will grow and move through wizard space, locating a water pipe to attach itself to. This one" --he displayed the thinner tube--"will seek out the source of hot water. The muggles will not notice them. After I say the charm, I will do likewise for the lavatory. You will always have clean water available."

Harry listened carefully, while Snape cast the charms. He stepped back, a little alarmed, as the tubes burrowed into the wall like questing snakes. A faint echoing whisper hinted at their movements. The taps chimed a musical tone to signal that the connection was complete.

"Go ahead," Snape told Harry. "Turn on the taps."

"Amazing!" Harry splashed his hands in the running water.

"Well done, Severus!" Minerva seconded the applause. "But I do want to add my own touch. It's a little dark in here. How about a window?" She looked very mysterious, and added, "A window that no muggle can see? You'll find this interesting, Mr Potter. It's another runic spell called Finn's Window. I think it an interesting example of using a runic diagram to effect a Transfiguration."

Snape watched. This was new to him.

Minerva used her wand to draw four concentric circles on the wall beside the shower. "You can also simply draw the circles by hand," she told the boy.

Harry murmured, "But that's not a wall to the outside."

"Doesn't matter," she answered a little sharply, intent on the symbols. Short lines cut through the circles at odd angles. When she was done, she tapped the center and called out, "Fiat Lux, Finn!"

Instantly there was a round window with a double frame of dark wood. Daylight streamed in, but only light. It was like light through frosted glass. Whatever the window was made of, it was translucent, not transparent.

"Will there always be light?" Harry asked, feeling a little intimidated. He had heard of changing rats into horses and pumpkins into coaches. He had even seen boxes become furniture, but this light seemed very peculiar to him.

"Only as long as it really is light outside," McGonagall answered.

"Can you open the window?"

"No. If you looked behind it at the wall, you would not see anything. There are runic spells for Finn's Eye and Finn's Portal, as well. But

the Eye is too complicated and time-consuming for today, and there would be no way to keep the muggles from seeing the Portal, certainly. Or hearing the noise," she added wryly. "It's very old magic in my mother's family. These days, wizards and witches apparate or use portkeys or Floo. Finn the Enchanter was an ancestor of mine, and he used the Portal to escape from a dungeon underground."

"Handy, if you're in a dungeon without a wand," Snape commented. He wondered if he could recreate the window. The markings probably needed to be precise. He would need to study them in a pensieve.

Minerva found the folding doors he had purchased to separate the little closet from the bathroom. Two charms had them enlarged and hinged to the wall. The last tap chimed. The bathroom was complete: simple and rather Spartan, but quite serviceable. Harry rounded up his water glass and toothbrush and put them away with great satisfaction.

Opening out the entrance was trickier. They had only the space between the lathe and the outer wall to work with, and it had to wrap around to the back of the house. Harry's outdoor access would be there, at the back corner nearest his room. The wall was opened at the foot of his bed, and two stories of space carefully expanded. A platform of replicating oak flooring extended out from the doorway: space enough for three people to stand comfortably. After reviewing all the attached spells, Snape floated down a shrunken spiral staircase of wrought iron to the exposed foundation, while Minerva cast a brilliant Lumos to help him see. The staircase expanded slowly, settling in more firmly to its magical grounding. Metal groaned as it stretched and spiraled up in a black helix, like Jack's giant beanstalk. The whole structure was rotated to allow one to step easily from the last riser to the platform outside Harry's door. The staircase was secured to foundation and platform, and then the stabilising charms were cast. Iron railings were added to make the platform safe and rather attractive. Finally, a toy-like door in its oaken frame swelled to fit the opening in the wall of Harry's room.

Snape strode out to the staircase to test his handiwork, while Harry looked on with excitement and Minerva with some trepidation. He bounced lightly on the balls of his feet, enjoying Minerva's wince.

"I'd say it's a success."

He grabbed up the bag with the rest of the materials, descended the stairs, and stood studying the large space at the bottom.

"I want to try those too!" Harry called, and clattered down to join Snape. "This is great!"

With more dignity, Minerva took the stairs carefully, and looked at the raw space, harsh in the wand light. "Perhaps that should all be closed in," she suggested.

"I could use it to store things," Harry volunteered. "Like a--like a bike. Maybe."

"A bike?" Minerva asked Severus.

"A bicycle. A two-wheeled conveyance without a motor. The closest muggles come to the sensation of riding a broom." He told Harry, "We can discuss it at least. It would get you out and give you some exercise."

"You can get places faster on a bike," Harry told Minerva. "I could go to the library and maybe all the way to Richmond Park!"

"We'll see." Snape said repressively. "Let's finish here first."

The two professors worked quickly: Minerva casting an illusion on the house to keep its appearance unchanged to muggles; and Snape cutting open the wall and setting the doorframe and door in place. The floor was uneven, and it required some adjustment. Eventually, however, it was done. The entry hall was sheathed in good-looking oak paneling, the ceiling in coffered wood, and the floor in polished planks. Minerva cast Muggle-Repelling and Notice-Me-Not charms on the outside door.

Snape had stretched his funds to buy two charmed lights, one for just within the outside door, and the other to be placed beside the upstairs

door leading to Harry's room. He fixed them to the paneling with a Sticking Charm.

"When you want them on, say 'Lights, please,'" he told Harry.

"Lights, please!" Harry yelled.

Instantly, they were bathed in radiant yellow light. It would suffice, though Harry suggested that he could learn to make Finn's Window here all by himself, and let in the sunshine.

"That would be a worthwhile project for another time," Minerva agreed. "But soon I must be off. I am responsible for visiting your muggleborn classmates, and I need to note down the responses from the other students."

"I really appreciate everything you've done, Professor." Harry looked up at her with gratitude. "I've learned heaps from you. When I go back to Diagon Alley, I want to get a book about runes!"

"That reminds me, Mr Potter," she said. "Before I go, I'd like to see you ward the upstairs door. You can demonstrate your runic expertise to Professor Snape."

Harry made a dash for his penknife, and hurried back to the doorway, a piece of parchment in hand as well. He explained to Snape, "First the professor made me practice writing the runes, so I wouldn't make a mistake carving them. Look--this one that's sort of like an H or an N is Hagalaz. That means Hail, but it's the first letter of my name, so it stands for me. Then that sign like a diamond with two tails is Othila. That means property or home or land. And this one like a Y with a little line in the middle is Algiz. It means protection. So altogether it sort of means 'I protect Harry's place,' or just 'Protect Harry's place.' And then I have words I have to say just right, and I need to say them so close to the runes that I breathe on them."

"Well, get to it, Mr Potter," Minerva told him.

Harry lay flat on his stomach, scratching carefully at the doorsill. Snape watched him in silence, not wanting to spoil the boy's

concentration. Minerva came over to examine the runes, and when Harry looked up questioningly after a few minutes, she nodded in approval.

The boy whispered to the little scratches, "I invoke you, Hagalaz, Othila, Algiz. Hear me, Runes of Worth. Let none enter here save by my will. Admit as friends of my threshold Professor Snape, Professor McGonagall, and Muffy the house elf. So mote it be, Hagalaz, Othila, Algiz!"

There was a crackling hum, which faded into the echoing blast of a distant horn. He got to his feet, beaming. "It was right, wasn't it?"

"Exactly right, Mr Potter," Minerva agreed. "I shall feel better knowing that you have learned a way to protect yourself. We've all done a good day's work here."

Harry nodded, and remarked, "Dudley would be so jealous."

Snape thought the boy should know something of what had been done to his relatives. "I must tell you, Mr Potter, that while it might be very amusing for you to lord it over your cousin, I would prefer that you did not. I have arranged things so that your family will not think of you. They will not notice the door to your room. It is for your safety, but I wish for your sake we could have punished them as they deserve."

Harry shrugged. "They've already been punished. I mean--they have to go on being themselves, and that alone is pretty bad."

Snape rolled his eyes. Minerva looked at the boy with a touch of pride.

"No, really--" Harry insisted. "--I'm going to a magic school, and I have all this and both of you to help me, and they're never going to be anything but what they are. I'm the lucky one, really."

Minerva nodded, and said, "You're a wise boy, Mr Potter. After all, you know what they say--" her eyes, full of compassion, slid to Snape.

"What?" Snape asked, impatiently.

She smiled. "That living well is the best revenge."

Snape looked away, filled with contradictory feelings. He still loathed the Dursleys, but after hearing about the events at Lily's wedding, he could at least understand them better. It would take some time to process the story, and he needed the quiet of his own quarters for that.

To give him a moment to collect himself, Minerva said to Harry, "I was thinking of returning next Saturday afternoon to see how you are getting on."

"I'd like that, professor."

"Good afternoon then, Mr Potter, Professor Snape."

She apparated away, and Harry shut the door on his handiwork. Blowing out a breath, he nearly fell into a chair, worn out with magic and the shock of the new.

"Aren't you tired, Professor?"

"A little," Snape agreed, taking one of the comfortable, old-fashioned chairs. "We've done a great deal today. I have duties as Hogwarts myself that I ought not to neglect, but I will certainly be back tomorrow morning, and we'll go out and find you some decent muggle clothes."

Harry stretched his legs out in front of him and studied his horrible trainers. Carefully, he did not look at Snape.

"Yes, I see them," Snape growled. "Shoes first."

A.N. I promise, when time allows, to post some runic information and other illustrations for this story at my website. I'll let you all know when I do. Thanks again for your feedback!

Chapter 12

The next few days were hectic. To his bemusement, Severus Snape found himself at a muggle shopping mall, an eager young boy by his side. He had never shopped at an indoor mall, and found it rather interesting. Were the wizarding world larger, it was an idea that could be adopted: a large derelict factory, for example, could house dozens of shops and businesses, while maintaining complete security. They strolled, joining the throngs of muggles, and Snape marveled at the amounts of--well--stuff--the muggle world produced. The wizarding world was a world of artisans, not of mass production. Witches and wizards tended to create one-of-a-kind items. Even brooms were built individually, even when they were made from a specific design. The production line was unknown here, and looking back at how his father's job at the mill had extinguished the man's spirit, Snape thought that it was for the best. Still, it was important to remember that gifted muggles had also produced works of remarkable value and beauty. He and Harry were both halfbloods, and should understand both the muggle and wizarding worlds.

--Even if that understanding had to be extended to the art of purchasing just the right trainers for a growing boy. He and Harry made a list before they left Privet Drive: a careful list detailing Harry's needs at home and school. The trainers might have been first on the list, but they were by no means all the boy required. Snape had thought he would want some jeans and T-shirts, but an examination of the contents of Harry's imposing chest of drawers revealed other deficiencies.

When he had pulled the third drawer open, Harry jumped up, crying, "Don't look at those, Professor!"

But Snape had already seen the pile of dingy, ragged grey underpants. He paused, fighting the impulse to caper about the room, shrieking, "Karma! Karma!" which would have convinced the boy that he had gone mad. He took a deep breath, and hoped it was true that the dead watched the living. James Potter had once viciously humiliated Snape for the same sort of pitiful undergarments. If James Potter were watching now, Snape reckoned that any revenge he owed for that prank was paid in full.

He did not shriek, or caper, or laugh at the boy. Instead, he pulled out the dismal objects-- obviously Dudley's--and sneered at them. "Unless you have some sort of sentimental attachment to these cleaning rags, I suggest that we get rid of them at once!"

He threw the first pair of grey underpants up into the air and fired an "Incendio!" at it. It burst into flame and dissolved into fine grey ash. Harry gaped with shock, and then roared with laughter. He snatched out handfuls of limp grey cloth and tossed them like clay pigeons. Snape blasted them obligingly. After a while Harry's laughs changed to coughs, and he opened his window to let out the smoke.

So "underwear" was inscribed just below "trainers" on the shopping list. And then, "socks." Furthermore, Harry had no pyjamas or robe or slippers. Snape explained why he would want such things at Hogwarts. Carefully, frugally, they spent the bulk of Vernon's eighty pounds, and Harry had the makings of a decent wardrobe by the time they were done. Harry found his headphones, and they sorted through bins of tapes. Snape explained why Harry needed to listen to The Who and Pink Floyd.

In fact, Snape decided that he himself needed to get out into the muggle world more. He had lived in a decaying mill town as a boy, and had never had the money to experience the more attractive aspects of muggle life.

He would not have gone alone anyway. It had never occurred to him, not since he was of age and gainfully employed, to visit the places he had heard of when a boy himself at the local primary. With a young person's education to consider, however, he now thought it behooved him to escort Harry on a number of outings to broaden the child's knowledge of the world. He decided it would be beneficial if they sometimes took the train, so Harry could have a better grasp of location and distance. It would help the boy when he began learning to apparate himself. Of course, the fact that Snape rather enjoyed train travel made the idea additionally pleasant. Until they took the train into London for a day at the Tower of London and the British Museum, Harry had never gone anywhere by rail. Snape made him

study the map of the Underground, and saw to it that Harry understood how to get about like a muggle if he had to. In a low voice, Snape supplemented the information posted with the relevant facts about the wizarding world.

Two days later they saw a production of Macbeth. The latter sparked a long conversation about how muggles perceived witches, and about prophecies and seers. Harry had read that Divination was taught at Hogwarts, and wondered how one learned to tell the future. Snape warned of the intrinsic dangers in such a pursuit.

"Macbeth didn't just let the prophecy come true," he pointed out. "He did everything he could to make it come true. Or at least the part he liked. And then all the things he didn't like came true because of the things he did to stop them."

"I--see," Harry said slowly. His thoughtful frown deepened.

It was a warm night, but Snape shivered all the same. "Prophecies are slippery things, Harry. Macbeth would have fared better had he never heard the prophecy. So would many another."

"But predicting the future is real, isn't it? I mean, they teach it at Hogwarts."

"After a fashion," Snape scoffed.

"If it can be taught," Harry pondered, "why can't all witches and wizards predict the future? Can you predict the future?"

"Certainly not. Teaching Divination is a complete waste of time. Either one has the talent or one does not. The talent can be trained, but not taught. Unless you manifest some inborn gift for the subject, I hope you will not fritter away your education. Anything else--even Muggle Studies--is a better choice."

"Muggle Studies," Harry chuckled to himself. Then he pointed out, "I could take the test for Muggle Studies, couldn't I? And get an extra O.W.L.?"

"I see no reason why you could not."

"But I'm definitely going to take Runes," Harry said with conviction. "Runes and something else. I haven't decided. I'm good at maths, so maybe I'd like Arithmancy. Or Care of Magical Creatures could be a lot of fun."

"You have two years to decide," Snape shrugged. He had taken CoMC himself, but that was because that course and Herbology were very useful in understanding potion ingredients. The boy might have the making of a true potioneer, like his mother, or he might not. Time would tell.

Snape had planned that before the end of August they would take a day trip to Salisbury, to see Stonehenge and the ruins of Roman Sarum. There would be another day trip out to Cornwall, a trip to be achieved partly by apparition. Snape wanted Harry to see Tintagel, with all its Arthurian associations, and the remains of Chun Castle, an Iron-Age hill fort--and to especially note at both sites the magical relics not mentioned in muggle scholarship. Harry had expressed a wish to go to a cinema and see Terminator 2. Harry had heard the whole first film from his cupboard and could fill Snape in on the background. Snape agreed, rather mystified. He had not seen a muggle film in years. To balance what he thought would be something very silly and clumsy-looking with some higher culture, Snape saw an advertisement for an outdoor concert, where they could listen to Beethoven and Elgar and Rimsky-Korsakov for free. Long ago, at muggle primary, an orchestra had visited the school and played Scheherazade. It would be a very agreeable to hear it again. He found a wizard-annotated edition of The Arabian Nights at Spinner's End, and lent it to Harry.

It pleased him--it pleased him acutely that Harry was so happy. The boy genuinely liked him, and valued his company. In his most cynical moments, back in his private quarters, Snape wondered if it was simply a matter of being in the right place at the right time. He had been the first to befriend the boy, the one to tell him of his heritage, the adult who had listened and talked and given a neglected boy a few treats. Be as that may, he had made an impression on him, perhaps even a greater impression than he had made on Lily that day

when he had shyly approached the little red-haired girl on the swing with the news that she was a witch. He had never made Lily happy in the same way that he made Harry happy.

Harry was certainly Lily's son, but there were great discrepancies in attitude and behavior. Lily had been a favored, beloved child: a remarkably pretty, appealing little girl, the sort of little girl the teachers adored. People would stop Mrs Evans in the street and tell her how beautiful her daughter was--and then ignore the plainer Petunia. He smiled wryly, remembering the times it had happened when he had been with them, and how strangers' eyes had slid away from him as if he were invisible. They only wanted to look at Lily. And she had loved the attention.

Not that she was outwardly arrogant or vain. Her self-esteem had such deep foundations that she did not need to make a display of it. David Evans had treated Lily with outrageous partiality--ironic, considering how little respect Lily actually had for him once she was a teenager. Virginia Evans, however, had been a very good mother--kind to Snape himself, he acknowledged gravely--and had done her best to instill nice manners and sensible habits in her daughters. He had not seen any real signs of favoritism in her treatment of Lily, at least until the shock of the Hogwarts letter. Even after that, he had noticed her paying attention to Petunia, praising her good grades in school, and seeing that she was treated fairly.

If only she had survived the accident, Snape thought wistfully. It would have saved Harry from a life a misery, and perhaps Petunia would have had a restraining influence in raising that Dudders of hers.

Such regrets were useless. Mrs Evans had not been able to prevent Petunia's marriage to Vernon Dursley, whom the older woman could not possibly have liked or approved of. Snape had always thought that Petunia was going to go to university. After seeming to accept that she would never be a witch, she had taken to sneering at Hogwarts and the wizarding world for its littleness and limited opportunities. She had talked about studying modern languages and working abroad. Well, so much for that. Of course, Lily, too, had once talked about seeking a potions apprenticeship in Italy. The summer they were thirteen, Snape and Lily had built castles in the air,

planning how they would go to the Continent together and take the potions world by storm.

So much for that, too. Perhaps Lily would have done something with her talents later in life, but she had died with the promise of her N.E.W.T.s unfulfilled. And Petunia, too, was a wife and mother, with no career outside the home.

But still, if only Virginia Evans had lived... Of course, the events at Lily's wedding had been traumatic, but she, at least, would not have blamed her orphaned grandson. Snape had not been invited to the wedding, but Petunia's story, stripped of her personal prejudice and ignorant fear, explained some of the Dursleys' ingrained hostility. Potter had been a fool to make such a grand event of it, given the tensions of the time. He had been an even greater fool to invite so many guests--ranging from muggles to old-fashioned, close-minded purebloods --and to hold it in the traditional venue: a ritual clearing in the forest of the Potter family estate. The preliminaries had been bad enough: Potter's Best Man had been witty at the expense of Lily's family. It was possible, Snape supposed, that Black would not have understood that such tricks would have frightened and bewildered them. Worse still was the unpleasantness at the ceremony itself--those horrible old harpies referring to Lily as a mudblood, denouncing Potter as a blood-traitor as he made his vows. And at the end, the brawl--hexes flying--the uproar halted only by the raw power of Dumbledore himself...

Snape hated Potter, yes--but he hated to think of Lily--and Virginia Evans, too--being attacked like that. It helped Snape understand why the Potters had gone into hiding, instead of making more of a show of defiance. Lily was fearless for herself, but to see her defenseless mother and father and sister tormented...

Well, he now understood why Petunia had told Lily that she and her sort were not welcome at Petunia's wedding. He could understand why she would utterly reject the wizarding world. He could even, he supposed, understand her resentment of Harry. What he could never forgive, of course, was how she had chosen to act on that resentment. The harm that woman had done him...

Harry had some of his mother's charm--her beautiful eyes and smile, of course--but it was mixed with a terrible, painful uncertainty. He had had only that one year of parental love, before being left like an unwanted puppy on the Dursleys' doorstep. When Minerva told Snape that story, he gave her his candid opinion of people who abandoned a toddler--who could have awakened and wandered away--on a doorstep in early November at night with only a blanket. She had been angry, and then had blushed, and then had admitted, shame-faced, "Albus is always so persuasive. It seemed reasonable at the time, though I knew the Dursleys were not the best people..."

Snape had not planned on visiting the boy every day, but he ultimately decided that he should regularly check in with Harry just before bedtime. He could find out what the boy's day had been like, and what progress he had made with his books, and in turn tell him about the potions he was brewing. He could make certain that the boy went to bed at a decent hour, and that he hadn't taken any harm when out and about on the streets of Little Whinging. It was his duty, after all. Gradually they were also working their way through Dudley's clothing and leftover toys. Harry's bathroom needed some sort of ventilation, it appeared, and so Snape revisited Magical Home and Garden, and found a small Aerovacuator that could be spelled into the wall.

Saturday came, and with it Minerva, who spent most of her long visit coaching Harry as he learned to write with a quill.

"Hold it so that the nib is at a 45-degree angle, Mr Potter," she lectured. "Yes. Like that. Now try your letters. Do you see how much better they look?"

Snape went out to a muggle hardware store to find a bolt for the boy's easel. It might be possible to transfigure one, but it was tricky to transfigure an item that needed to meet certain industrial tolerances. It was quite beyond his skill. He could make something that looked and felt like a bolt, but that would not fit perfectly. Nor did he, unlike Minerva, have the rare, true Master's power to effect permanent Transfigurations. Besides, he did not want to bother Minerva with such a trifle while she was busy with a more important lesson. By the time he was back and had fixed the easel, it was time to be off, for

today he and Minerva planned to apparate to Godric's Hollow to see if anything could be retrieved from the wreck of the Potters' last hiding place. Snape had wanted to go before he visited Diagon Alley with Harry again, just in case there were items already available that would be useful to the boy at school.

Albus would go with them. He had obtained leave from the Ministry to unseal the cottage cum shrine--easily enough since the house was originally his. As the rightful owner, it would be much simpler to bypass any residual wards or other protections remaining. And of course, it was he who could tell them if any of the items they found were Dumbledore heirlooms or Potter property.

Muffy brought Harry his lunch, and they bade the boy goodbye. Snape gathered that Harry liked Muffy to sit with him while he ate. It was unconventional, to be sure, but Harry enjoyed the company--

Perhaps it was time he met more witches and wizards.

Albus dawdled interminably over his lunch. Snape sensed that he found the prospect of the upcoming visit rather disagreeable. To be sure, it would be painful to see the site of Lily's last moments, but Snape had steeled himself to it. He should have done so long ago. The Potters were buried at Godric's Hollow, and it was time he paid his respects. Minerva, too, was not very cheerful about the errand.

But Albus' reluctance seemed to be particularly strong. Of course, he would be seeing the ruins of his own house. That could not be pleasant.

"Did you ever live there yourself?" he asked the old wizard.

"At the cottage in Godric's Hollow, do you mean?" Albus' voice was rather subdued. "Oh, yes, yes. From the time I was a young boy. Not our first family home, but the place I came home to from Hogwarts. There was a time when it was very dear to me. But things change, you know-- When I suggested it to James and Lily, no one had lived there in decades." He chuckled, but it sounded hollow to Snape's

ears. "James and Lily certainly had a great deal to do to make it livable again. But they loved it, after a time--the place where they hoped to raise their child in safety..."

The old man played with his pudding. Snape held in his impatience with an effort. Finally, it was Minerva who stood, and stared imperiously at the Headmaster until he roused himself from his reverie.

"Eager to be gone, Minerva my dear?"

"Well begun is half-done, Albus," she replied crisply. "And I must pay a return visit to one of our muggle-raised students. Her mother is being very difficult. I must be at her door when she returns from work at five o'clock."

The old man nodded absently, and rose with a deep sigh.

They apparated to a shielded spot near the heart of Godric's Hollow. Snape looked about him with interest. It was a country village, he supposed, like scores of others. Very English, rather quaint, but not irritatingly so. Godric's Hollow, he knew, was one of those oddities of the wizarding world: a village that was home to both wizards and muggles. That the muggles often had to be obliterated or confounded made a mockery of the Statute of Secrecy in his opinion. From what he could gather, the wizards and witches in places like Godric's Hollow and Tinworth and Upper Flagley regularly indulged in behavior that would be a criminal offense elsewhere. However, hundreds of years of precedents and customs gave them unusual licence. No one took notice of the three of them or of their clothing. Albus was unusually quiet, looking about him with a hint of melancholy.

They stepped out of the shadows into a little square. There were shops and a post office and a pub: The Green Man. There was some sort of memorial in the center of the square, but Snape noticed the small and ancient stone church first, and then caught a glimpse of elm trees in full leaf and a kissing gate. The churchyard.

Albus spoke up, his voice frail as old leaves. "I would like," he managed, "to pay my respects. Perhaps it would be best to go now, rather than later."

Minerva shot him a sharp glance, but did not argue. "Very well. Shall we all go? Severus?"

"If you wish."

As they passed by the memorial, Snape saw it more clearly, and froze.

Muggles might see a war memorial, but there for the magical world to behold was a sentimental representation of the Potter Family. Cloying family affection, expressed in marble. Together forever were James Potter, his bloody stupid hair sticking out untidily; the figure of a long-haired woman purported to be Lily; and a generic happy baby that must be an icon of The-Boy-Who-Lived.

"Severus?" Minerva whispered anxiously.

Snape tasted bile in his mouth. "That has to be the ugliest statue on the face of the earth," he said coldly. "Who's responsible for this?"

Albus was placatory. "The Ministry commissioned a German wizard, Wolfram von Zauberberg--"

"--who clearly never saw any of them in life," Snape observed acidly.

"There were photographs--"

"It's a terrible likeness of Lily. She didn't look like that at all."

Minerva, surprisingly, agreed in part. "It's the marble, Severus. The features are correct, but Lily was all color and life. It's the all-white marble that doesn't do her justice."

"I suppose," he replied. "It's hideous all the same." He turned his back on the object, and strode off toward the graveyard. Minerva and Albus followed, talking together quietly.

Pushing open the kissing gate, Snape moved past rows of tombstones, hardly looking at them, hardly knowing where he was going. Why was he here? How could this possibly be a good idea? It had crossed his mind to bring Harry here, but now he knew he would never propose it to the boy. What had that marble atrocity to do with the lovely friend of his youth? With the lively, sensitive boy he knew? With Snape himself? Snape thought it horribly unseemly to include the image of a living child in that monument to the dead. It was morbid and disgusting. And Lily in white: white-haired, white-eyed, like a ghost--

--And Potter. God, he hated Potter. He supposed it pointless to hate a man long dead, but Potter's stupidity had outlived him. The repercussions of that stupidity would affect Harry for the rest of his life. If he thought he could get away with it, and that Harry would understand, he would like to blast that revolting statue to fragments.

He scowled, and then heard a deep sigh. Minerva and Albus were standing by him. It was Albus who had sighed. The old man was gazing at a granite stone, carved with the name "Dumbledore."

"Kendra Dumbledore" and "And Her Daughter Ariana." Below it was inscribed:

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Snape guessed that from the dates--

"Yes," Albus was saying to Minerva, "my mother and sister. How long ago it was, and yet today it seems but a brief moment since I saw them last."

Minerva put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "A sad thing that your sister died so young. Just a schoolgirl."

Albus shook his head. "No. Ariana was never--well enough--to attend school. She lived here with my mother, and after my mother died, my brother and I cared for her. Long ago." He sighed again, and managed something that was not quite a smile when he saw Severus looking at him. "This way, my boy."

With a gesture, he led the way through the graveyard. Some of the stones were very old. Some were inscribed with wizarding names: names of the families of boys and girls he had gone to school with; of boys and girls he had taught. Wizards had been in Godric's Hollow a long, long time.

Two rows beyond the Dumbledores' monument, he saw a marker of white marble. His heart sank. I will never feel the same about white marble again. It was a large marker and easily read. James had Lily by his side for all time, if such a thing could matter to mouldering dust. Snape was irritated that Lily's middle and maiden name were not shown--as if she had always somehow been a Potter. He suspected that if she had been a pureblood witch, her birth family's name certainly would have been blazoned there as well. Below the names there was an epitaph:

"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."

What is that supposed to mean? he wondered, scowling. He bit back any comment. For all he knew, that inscription had been Dumbledore's brilliant idea. An attempt to be profound, but ultimately a sentiment that disturbed him. It sounded like the sort of rubbish spouted by the Dark Lord's followers. To devour Death, to take it within you, to master it completely, to transcend it--

If Dumbledore's theory about Old Magic was correct, Lily had found a way to overcome the wizard who had caused her own death, and thus save her son from a like fate. All the same, he disliked the message: disliked it intensely. All very well for Potter--he spat the name mentally--to bluster and preen about destroying enemies. Lily was a fighter--yes, certainly--but not a destroyer. Not she. He rejected such a description of her. He hated the inscription. It was rubbish.

Minerva touched his arm. "I should like to leave them some roses. Would she have liked red or pink best?"

"Yellow," Snape told her flatly. "Lily loved yellow roses. Roses yellow as the sun itself."

The cottage was some way on, beyond the little houses crowded together in the village proper. At first, Snape did not even see the cottage. Dumbledore halted, and Snape looked where the Headmaster was looking. The cottage was nearly hidden behind an overgrown hedge, and was covered thickly with ivy.

The ivy somewhat softened the shocking damage. The right side of the top floor had been blown apart. The cottage was open to the sky there, where Lily must have died. As they touched the gate, a sign popped out of the ground:

On this spot, on the night of 31 October, 1981--

The sign was defaced with years of wizarding graffiti: initials, names and dates, "Fenton loves Morwenna" in Everlasting Ink, "Thank you, Harry!" in a childish scrawl, and even "The Dark Lord wil Returne!" which someone else had nearly succeeded in obliterating. Snape looked again at the last inscription, wondering if that was Crabbe's handwriting. Crabbe, Goyle, and Malfoy had all had sons the same age--the same age as Harry, in fact. Snape hoped Crabbe's son was not as thick as his father. It would not be pretty, dealing with the lot of them all together this year.

Albus performed a lengthy incantation. Wards hummed and sizzled as they dissolved, and then the old wizard led the way, looking rather fragile. Another incantation was uttered at the shattered front door, and the three of them stepped into the last home of the Potters.

Chapter 13

A good-sized cottage. A spacious, beamed room for sitting, and the attached dining area making it all an L-shaped space. The floor was littered with trash. The windows were broken.

"There was some damage from the elements for about a month before the house was sealed," Dumbledore murmured. "Since then, no one has entered."

Minerva had straightened her shoulders, and was poking about briskly, going through a doorway to what must be the kitchen. Snape heard her opening cupboards, her quick steps echoing on the rustic wooden floor. Dumbledore stood lost in thought--and perhaps in memories. Snape walked about the sitting and dining areas, assessing what was there.

Not a great deal at first sight. He noted in the dining area that the table and sideboard were bare, save for a coating of dust. No candlesticks, no ornaments of any kind. There was a single painting on the wall, so badly damaged by water that at first he could not determine what it was.

Minerva came out of the kitchen, wiping dust from her hands, a grimace of disgust twisting her mouth. She laid three thin books on the dining table. "These had Lily's name in them." Then she looked at the painting and said, "Oh, dear!"

Severus looked more closely. It had been the portrait of a man and a woman in a garden. The woman's hair did not appear to be red, and so it was almost certainly not Lily. The figures moved slightly and their blurred mouths opened, but no sound emerged.

Minerva was quite distressed. "Oh, Lydia. What a shame!" She explained to Snape, "I know this picture. These people are Guy and Lydia Potter, James' father and mother. Likely it's the one portrait he took with him into hiding. I hope it can be restored."

Dumbledore, hearing the conversation, came over to examine it. "Possibly, Minerva. possibly. It ought to be sent to the experts in

Florence. In fact, I shall be happy to see to it. Young Harry would want to be able to see his grandparents." He unstuck the picture from the wall, and levitated it gently into the entryway. "Something that must be taken with us," he said to himself.

Snape took a look at the books, and raised his brows. "Your Magical Little One. Charms for Hearth and Home. One Minute Feasts."

Minerva said, "There was nothing else but rotted food and some crockery in the kitchen. They must have just finished dinner. The dishes had not even been washed." Her gaze swept the dining table. "They must have had a high chair for Harry."

There was a gap at the table. Minerva's lips thinned. "Someone took it as a souvenir, I daresay. Vultures."

Snape agreed, shrugging. "It looks like anything out in plain sight was scavenged. Surely they would have had candlesticks or lamps."

The doors of the sideboard were charmed shut. It took a number of attempts before they opened.

"Well!" Minerva huffed. "This is much more the thing!"

A miscellany of items. Albus sat down, and did not appear to be enjoying the inventory.

A chest of old silver flatware. The monogram "P" indicated the ownership. "I don't remember this," Minerva frowned. "Eighteenth century and fine work, but the Potters always used a set made of gold when I dined at their country house. I suppose that went to the goblins," she sighed. "The gold plates and goblets too, most likely."

There were a few pieces of old porcelain: thin and white, with a band of gold and golden stags at the cardinal points. "The Potter family crest," Minerva told Severus. "I had forgotten."

Snape said nothing. He knelt, peering into the recesses. There was a silver tea service, also quite old, also unknown to Minerva. Albus, when applied to, did not remember it from his own youth. It was set

out on the table, and examined for any identifying marks. Finding nothing, Albus said, "If I cannot be certain it was my family's, I think we must assume it was the Potters'. In any case, let the child have it to brighten his home someday. I certainly have no need of it."

A pair of plain silver candlesticks caused Albus to smile gently.

"Ah, yes. Let us put those aside for Harry as well." Minerva looked at the underside of one, and raised her brows skeptically, but Albus shrugged. "After all, why not?" he said, almost to himself, "So little left to him--"

Aside from what they spread out on the table, there was little enough to be found downstairs. The florid Victorian china that had been the Dumbledores' was left in the cupboard, along with their own monogrammed silver. Dumbledore shut the cupboard and charmed it locked. He paused, and patted the sideboard, as if in farewell.

Fallen beside the sofa were two books. One was so damaged as to be illegible, but the other was a copy of Quidditch through the Ages. Snape deposited it on top of the other books with a thump. "So much for the Potter Family Library," he sneered.

Minerva was too discouraged to say anything. The upstairs was next, but they all paused this time. The newel post of the staircase was splintered, and there were blast marks on the wall. James Potter had died here. Stepping carefully, they climbed the stairs in silence.

They were drawn, almost against their will, to the most damaged room. It had been Harry's nursery. Snape tried to suppress his trembling, tried not to imagine Lily's last moments: her terror and anguish--

She must have been upstairs with Harry when they broke in. They would have put up anti-apparition wards first. She was trapped. Potter was downstairs and was killed in short order. She would have heard him die. She would have heard Him coming up the stairs--

The roof had collapsed in the magical explosion. A child's cot was partially hidden under some rubble. It seemed a miracle that an infant

could have survived. The remains of a decayed plush wolf lay disemboweled in a corner. Some faded curtains still hung above a hole in the wall that once held a window. Albus moved to look out through it at the back garden, a jungle of brambles and thistles.

"My old room, you know," he told them, gazing at the garden. "A great many memories--"

Snape and Minerva left him to his thoughts. Obviously nothing could be salvaged here. Snape could not even bear to look at the floor, wondering where Lily's body had lain. Had the roof crushed her? Was her face--

Minerva was a few steps ahead of him. "Bathroom," she declared. "Nothing here but old bottles, mostly broken. I don't see James shaving kit, even."

She looked into the next room. "I don't think--" she hesitated. "A guest room." He walked in behind her. It was damaged, but not too badly. A small, neat room, with an old-fashioned carved headboard. A trunk stood against the wall beside the wardrobe.

Minerva bent to look at it. "Some nasty wards here," she murmured. She looked more closely, and stood up with a hiss. "Sirius Black's trunk!"

"A frequent guest, no doubt," Snape replied acidly. "If you wish to touch that object, be my guest."

"Not for the world!" she cried, and stalked out the room, very angry.

The last room had hardly been damaged by the explosion at all, but at first it appeared so. It was the largest of the rooms, and must obviously have been Lily's room. And her husband's. Disgusted at the thought, he studied the jumble on the floor. Two trunks had crashed out of the wardrobe and had fallen to the floor by the bed, one partly on top of the other.

"The shrinking charms wore off after a few years," Minerva deduced. "Then the trunks pushed the doors of the wardrobe open." More cheerfully, she said, "Perhaps we'll find something useful here."

Snape hoped so. Like the downstairs, the surfaces of dressing table and nightstand were bare. If there had been other trunks or luggage left out, they were gone. He tested a drawer, and was relieved to find that it resisted him.

"Probably something in the drawers, at least," he agreed. "What about these trunks first?"

They were levitated and turned right side up, and were revealed to be Hogwarts student trunks.

"That's why they were shrunk!" Minerva smiled fondly. "James and Lily kept their school things. Perhaps there are books and pictures and all sorts of treasures inside."

"James had quite a nice trunk," Snape allowed. It was old, but still sound: the outside of rugged Horntail leather, bound in brass. A trunk like this was expensive--far more than Harry should lay out from his little hoard. If the inside were equally intact, perhaps it would be sensible to replace the nameplate and let Harry take it to Hogwarts. It was--appropriate--that the boy have something of his father's. Lily's standard student trunk was cheaper, and it showed in gashes and dents and splits in the wood and the cowhide.

Minerva smiled nostalgically. "I believe it was his father's before him. This sort of trunk is built to last. He was a prankster, too--Guy Potter was." Her smile fading, she ventured, "Perhaps--we should look through them carefully before we let Harry see them. Just in case there are--surprises."

Snape snorted. "I'll look through Lily's. You are welcome to Potter and his surprises. I had all I cared for in my school days."

She glared at him, but did not outright refuse. With little effort the old student wards were lifted, and the trunks opened.

Lily's trunk had been left in good order, but contained things that Snape was not quite prepared to face. An album was filled with pictures of her family and her days at Hogwarts. Snape flipped through it, and was touched when he discovered that she had not thrown out the pictures of them together in those early, golden years. There were some muggle pictures too: of Snape and Lily and Petunia playing outside the Evans house. He turned the page and saw young Severus and Lily on the day they first left for Hogwarts. He shuddered. Lily looked enchanting. He, on the other hand, had been a scrawny little gnome of a boy: all nose and staring black eyes. He thumbed through the book, mourning as the pictures of him grew fewer, and more of more of them depicted Potter and his minions. A picture of Lily standing between Potter and Black particularly incensed him. Both had an arm around her. Black winked at him. Snape clapped the album shut, and set it aside with a growl.

A set of student robes from her seventh year were neatly folded. Pinned to them was her Head Girl badge. Underneath was every single textbook from her Hogwarts years, along with her detailed notebooks. Her best essays were preserved. A folder held her first Hogwarts letter, the letter giving her a prefectship, and the letter awarding her the position of Head Girl. On the other side of the folder were her grade reports and her O.W.L. and N.E.W.T results. Snape read them with interest.

Ha! On their O.W.L.s they had done about equally well. She had an outstanding in Charms rather than his Exceeds Expectations, but he had surpassed her--by far--in Defense. She did better in Transfiguration, and he in History. Their grades were the same in Potions, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, and Astronomy--all Outstandings. She had an extra O.W.L.-- Outstanding--since she had troubled to take the Muggle Studies test.

Her N.E.W.T scores made him acknowledge that their lives had diverged in the two years after their estrangement. He had taken Potions, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, Charms, Transfiguration, Arithmancy, History, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. She had N.E.W.T.s in Potions, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, Charms, Transfiguration, Arithmancy, Astronomy, and Muggle Studies. She had done extremely well. He knew that

Slughorn had recommended her to his contacts among the Unspeakables. When she showed no interest in that, he had tried to set up interviews with Ministry Department Heads and even with the editor of Potions Today. She had refused them all, always with a charming smile. She was planning her wedding, and was not ready to commit herself to any position other than that of James Potter's wife. Slughorn had confided his disappointment to Snape.

"Frightful waste. Frightful. Of course, she's done very nicely for herself. Good blood, old money. She'll move in the very first circles of society. But--" Slughorn shook his head until the ends of his mustache quivered. "I never thought she would throw the Art over to be a society girl. Didn't imagine it. Well, well, perhaps in a few years time she'll find herself at loose ends--"

Minerva was muttering to herself, and Snape looked up guiltily. He bit back a harsh laugh as she removed a half-empty bottle of Ogden's from James' trunk, along with a pile of muggle girlie magazines. One of them flopped open, and a picture unfolded. Minerva tossed them aside with a huff. Still glaring at the magazines, she reached into the trunk and drew out a pair of girl's knickers. A name was scrawled on them in scarlet ink.

"Mary!" Minerva exclaimed in shock, dropping them.

Snape laughed outright. She glared at him, very flustered, and then pulled out a succession of more knickers. All were inscribed with names he recognized. All houses were represented. Minerva was livid with indignation, while Snape only laughed harder. She pulled out the last fragile garment, and read, 'Lily.'"

Snape's laughter ceased abruptly. He snarled, and tore through the rest of Lily's trunk. There were some additional books: Most Potente Potions and Alchemist Supreme: The Life of Nicholas Flamel. Both of them would be worthy additions to Harry's small library. Snape wondered where Lily's potions gear was. There was a packet of cards and letters from her family. There was nothing else remaining but a small white box. As he opened it, Snape remembered what it was.

Inside was a little enameled lily pendant on a silver chain. Snape had given it to her the last Christmas they were friends. She had kept it. He sat back on his heels, and blew out a breath. "Done here. She kept all her books and notes. While some of the texts have changed, the notes will still be of some use. And there's a photo album. Harry will enjoy looking at it."

"Well, you can help me here," Minerva told him sharply. "This trunk is a pig's breakfast. I'd deduct points if I could. I'm hardly going to give Harry these--" she said, with an angry wave at the discarded knickers and magazines.

"Are you going to give him the Ogden's?" Snape asked archly.

She sniffed. "No. I'm going to confiscate it, just as I would have at Hogwarts. It doesn't belong in a student trunk!"

In the trunk were James' seventh year textbooks and notebooks. There were no letters or test scores, but his Head Boy badge was there. His Gryffindor tie was tangled up with a lone sock and a red and gold scarf. A few other books were inside the trunk.

Minerva read the titles. "Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches... Madcap Magic for Wacky Warlocks...Ars Animagi!" she exclaimed. "I wonder if James succeeded with the transformation. That's a valuable book, Severus, but I don't think Harry is quite ready for it."

Snape was paging through a small leather notebook. He said, "I believe he must have succeeded, Minerva. Look."

The book included notes about Potter's progress in the animagus transformation. There were dates and details, and some sketches of a hand or foot.

Minerva was grave. She took a look at the last few entries. "Yes. He was an animagus. His form was a stag. And he was not alone. Black and little Peter Pettigrew also succeeded. So young!" She briefly looked very proud, and then her face hardened. "They were running wild together in the Forbidden Forest every full moon, along with Remus Lupin. Those wretched--"

"Just so," Snape agreed smoothly. "I daresay Harry will be inspired."

"I don't want him to see this yet either," Minerva declared, glancing further through the book. "Not just for all the rule-breaking, but because there are some very rude remarks in here about some of his classmates."

"I daresay I feature prominently," Snape drawled.

"You do. And I don't think Harry would be impressed by either his father's attitude toward you or by the things he writes about some of the girls in his classes. When he's older, perhaps he'll be able to understand that his father was very young and silly when he wrote this."

There were some expensive trifles in the bottom of the trunk. A small mirror had shattered, making Snape pick warily through the broken glass until he could find the frame and repair it. He wondered what it was meant to do, and tossed it to the side. There was a fine pair of Omnioculars in a leather case, and a compact chess set of ebony and ivory. At the very bottom was a clutter of broken quills and sticky, ancient sweets. Snape took the lot out, and scourged the inside.

"A very nice trunk," Snape repeated. "Harry will find it useful. I have no idea if he knows how to play chess, but perhaps I'll find time to teach him a bit about it. He could use the chessmen and some of the notes. I'll order a new nameplate. Whatever else we preserve can be crated and stored in the Gringotts vault. He might want Lily's trunk to remain as it is, but I'll take the album to show him. He might want to keep that by him."

"We're hardly finished," Minerva sighed, getting to her feet. She pushed open the broken doors of the wardrobe. Amid the humdrum clothing of black and brown and dark red, robes of iridescent white hung inside.

"Lily's wedding robes," Minerva said, stroking a delicate bell sleeve. "We must take them, too."

Snape rooted through the wardrobe. There was some good clothing and haberdashery there, including a splendid fur-trimmed cloak, but obviously nothing that would fit the boy. Lily's dress robes were here too, gleaming golden silk, along with a wrap of white ermine. Minerva enlarged some boxes she had brought with her. She packed what had not been eaten by moths, and shrank the boxes again. Snape allowed himself to touch the wedding gown once only. She would have looked like a queen

All the drawers were pulled open, and the contents evaluated. Minerva sat at the dressing table, while Snape opened the chest of drawers. The top drawer held clothing of Potters', and on top of the linen handkerchiefs was a small object of gold. Snape touched it, and felt a faint flutter. In a flash, he pictured James Potter, toying with that bloody Snitch, tossing it up, catching it, smirking...

There were many things he was prepared to do for Harry. However, he had just discovered one that was completely beyond his strength. He covered the snitch with the handkerchiefs, and pushed the drawer to.

"Anything there?" Minerva asked, as she discarded dried-up toiletries.

"Just old rubbish," Snape replied, moving on to the next drawer.

"Here too," Minerva mourned. "I wonder if Lily kept any of the family jewels at all."

Snape pawed through Potter's oddments, more and more revolted. The next drawer was even more painful, as Lily's dainty lingerie was exposed. It was just as well that Minerva was present, lest he be tempted to filch trophies like a teenaged James Potter. He shut that drawer, and then looked briefly at folded jumpers in the colors she had loved: soft peach, russet brown, a bluish-green that reminded him of Harry. With her hair and eyes, Lily had looked magnificent in true greens, but never wore them at school after third year or so. And then, after she was married, I daresay James Potter banned green altogether. Snape could not quite square the concept of Lily, the obedient wife, with the fiery girl he had known; but he did not want to

imagine that she herself would have done something so silly as to choose never to wear the color that became her best.

"I see no point in taking their everyday clothing," he told Minerva, who only nodded.

At last, he reached the deep bottom drawer of the chest, and knelt to spell it open. The wards seemed very complicated, and Minerva was finished with the dressing table before the drawer was open. There were other footsteps, and Snape realized that Albus had entered the room.

Minerva said to him, "I believe we might have found something important, Albus. Whatever is in here is heavily protected."

In the end, they all worked together for half an hour to open the drawer. It finally surrendered with a groan, and slid open of its own accord. Inside was an aged tome that Dumbledore immediately identified as the Potter Family Grimoire: a collection of spells, enchantments, potions recipes, stories, and genealogy. Next to it was a rather large chest of inlaid wood.

"Oh, I hope--" Minerva breathed. Snape did not understand what she meant, until Albus found a way to open the chest and reveal what lay inside.

Snape's jaw dropped. Now this was what he called treasure!

Albus lifted out an ancient gold diadem, set with huge cabochon rubies and gleaming pearls. Little gold leaves dangled trembling all around the bottom of it. At the front was a goddess, carved out of rock crystal, in something of an ancient Greek style. Above the goddess soared a golden tree flanked by a pair of golden stags. Astonishing gold animals followed them in a procession.

Snape sat on the bed, staring at it, winded. "That's--very old."

"Indeed it is, Severus," Albus agreed in his reedy voice. "Sarmatian--probably from the first century. For hundreds of years it has been worn by Potter brides, and for a thousand years before that it was

worn as part of the ritual regalia of the Witch Queens of their line, long before they were Potters, or de Poitiers, or Poddarghs."

"I have a picture of Lily on the day of her wedding," Minerva said mildly. "Perhaps you would like to see it."

Snape thought he was choking. "Yes," he coughed out. "Yes. Very much. Thank you."

Out of the chest was drawn a long chain of rough cut rubies, held together by square gold links. It was old, too, but not as old as the diadem. "Tenth century Byzantine," Snape guessed.

"Well spotted, Severus," said Albus with a nod. "And in here is also a jeweled cloak pin from the same period, and this--"

He held up a heavy gold signet ring. A coat of arms was surmounted by a heavy-antlered stag.

"The Potter Family Ring," Minerva said with relief. "I'm glad Harry will have that. Lily would never let James wear it," she told Snape. "She thought it too feudal for words."

In the box was a piece of parchment, which proved to be the contract by which the wizard James Potter leased Hartwold Hall and its demesne--the Potter family estate--to the witch Celestina Warbeck for the sum, paid in full, of fifty thousand galleons. It was signed in 1980, and would end December 31, 2079, or five days after the death of said witch Celestina Warbeck, whichever occurred first. Albus folded it carefully and laid it back in the box.

Minerva said, "The rest of the jewels are long gone, no doubt. Lydia's diamonds, the old Peverell pearls--"

Snape examined the signet ring, but dropped it as he was passing it back to Albus. The ring fell heavily to the floor and rolled away under the bed. Snape bent to pick it up--it could be awkward to summon small, heavy objects of metal when standing with other people. When he flipped up the bed cover he saw it, and by it the corner of a thick volume bound in dull red leather.

"There's something else here," he told his companions. He gave the ring to Minerva, and reached for the book.

As his fingertips touched it, he screamed.

Chapter 14

No time to think, no time to react. Snape lay helpless, his body shaking, his mind nearly blank. Boundless darkness floated before him, like the edge of a grave, like the roaring cataract at the edge of the world. From a great distance, he heard a horrible animal grunting: his own voice in syncopation with his rigors. He would feel like this for all eternity.

Quite suddenly, the spasms stopped. Snape lay dazed and still. He had not felt pain, but profound shock. For a moment, all he could manage was the feat of breathing, in and out. He squinted down his arm. It seemed a long, long, long way to his hand. His fingers were inches from the dark red leather spine of a thick codex.

Minerva was speaking to him in a strange, calm voice, ordering him to do something.

"Severus. Move away from the book."

He could not answer, but gaped at her stupidly.

"Severus." The hand she offered him was glowing and blurred at the edges. "Let me help you up. Don't try to touch the book again. No, Albus! Step back."

Dumbledore was anxiously pushing forward, "--what kind of harm he has taken--"

"M'all right," Snape croaked. "M's'prised." His jaw was not working quite right. "Whazzat?"

"A work of very perilous Dark Magic--"

"No, Albus," Minerva contradicted him. "Not Dark Magic. This is Something Else. Don't try to touch the book. It is not for wizards. If you touch it, it will warn you away--"

"M'warned, too bloo'y right--" Snape gargled.

Minerva pulled him up to a sitting position, saying, "--and if you looked inside it, it would do considerably worse to you. Lily was insanely reckless to leave this where James--or little Harry!--could have gotten into it."

Snape swayed and blinked. This was not at all like the aftermath of the Cruciatus Curse. Instead, he was simply exhausted, as if he had been running the length of Britain. He tried to collect his scattered thoughts.

Dumbledore peered cautiously at the red tome under the bed. There was no title on the spine: no writing on the cover. After a long moment, he hazarded, "Could this be the book that is sometimes referred to as the *Mysteria Bonae Deae*?"

Minerva looked sharply at him, reluctant to answer. Finally she said, "It's really not a subject I can discuss with you. The book may be technically Harry's, but it is my duty to take care of it. Stand aside."

"The What?" Snape asked Albus. The syllables were only gibberish to him. He could barely understand English at the moment, let alone Latin.

Looking concerned, Albus was casting a diagnostic spell at him. He said quietly, "Mysteries of the Good Goddess, known also as Secrets of the Great Mother. I believed the book to be a myth."

Minerva retrieved the volume, and tucked it under her arm, her face stony. "It has nothing to do with you. Lydia showed me this book many years ago. It's very unfortunate that Lily came upon it with no one to guide her. I shall keep it safe, and when Harry someday takes a bride, I shall give it into her keeping."

"M'pu'ing," Snape cleared his throat hard. "I'm putting everything in the Gringotts vault, but perhaps--"

"Exactly," Minerva snapped. "And I'll thank you both to say nothing about this book to anyone else. It might cause trouble for you." She glared at them, and hissed, "Serious trouble."

Snape did not need convincing. "It's very powerful. Perhaps the Dark Lord was really searching--"

"It would have been impossible for him to make use of this," Minerva declared with perfect confidence. "Not even through a female minion."

"I'm quite sure that Voldemort knows nothing about this book or its contents," Dumbledore said lightly. He stopped a moment, his eyes widening a bright blue fraction, excitement in the twinkling depths. "Quite sure," he continued, sounding nearly like his normal self. "I only once came across a reference to it--in a work that ceased to exist in 1915." He smiled then, his good humor entirely restored. "Yes. Well, Severus, you seem to have taken no lasting hurt from gazing at the unclothed goddess--" he hastily nodded an apology to the indignant Minerva, "--in a manner of speaking." In that tone he used when he was trying to get round someone, he said to her, "It might be helpful to know if Lily might have found something---I don't know---something useful in the book--something that might have--"

Minerva said coldly, "I can't possibly give you specifics, but I shall look into it. It is--conceivable."

Snape muttered, "Ought to have poked him with it. Or chucked it at his head."

"Severus," Minerva silenced him icily. "How good was Lily's Latin?"

By good, she explained, she did not mean if Lily was able to pronounce spells correctly, or limp through a paragraph of Agrippa. "Could she read it as well as she read English? Did she understand regional idiosyncrasies? Did she understand the subtle differences in usage over centuries?"

"I--don't know," Snape answered. "She studied some Latin in muggle school. A year or two. I know she worked a bit on her own. We worked together for a few summers. I tend to think she was not an expert, but I might be wrong. I don't know how she spent her days after Hogwarts. Possibly she undertook an intense study of Latin at that time."

"I don't think so," Albus considered. "I saw Lily now and then, and her time was very engaged elsewhere."

Minerva said softly, "She may not have understood clearly what this was...She may not even have realized the dangers..." Her face closed, and she changed the subject resolutely. "Here," she said, handing Snape a small moneybag. "I found this in the dressing table. It has fifteen galleons, five sickles, and six knuts in it. I think we can agree that this is also Harry's."

"Indubitably," Albus smiled.

Snape creaked to his feet somewhat warily, clutching the bag. Fifteen galleons was a handy sum. Changed to muggle money, it might well be enough for the bicycle Harry kept hinting at. He tossed it into James' empty trunk.

"I suppose we're mostly done here," he said, somewhat sorry they had not found more. "Wait. Is there a cellar?"

"Off the kitchen," Minerva told him, busily shrinking the boxes and trunks.

It was something to do. Surely Lily had a potions laboratory somewhere. If it was not up here, it must be elsewhere. He heard Minerva and Albus talking quietly until he reached the bottom of the stairs and pushed through to the kitchen and pantry.

Minerva was right. There was nothing here of value. He grimaced in faint distaste, and opened a door. The pantry was a wreck, already rifled by rats and human souvenir hunters. Another door led outside, and was heavily damaged. Unsurprisingly, the attackers had struck at both entrances to the house. A third door remained.

It led down a narrow staircase to pitch darkness below. Snape uttered a quick "Lumos," and reconnoitered in the crumbling, low-ceilinged hole in the ground.

A heavy cauldron squatted on a worktable, covered in dust. A set of crystal phials rested in a wooden rack. Shelves of ingredients hung on the nearby wall. Snape fingered the jars briefly. There was nothing usable left in them. In fact, the full jars and the dusty shine of the gear suggested that the laboratory had not been much used at all. It was really a very uninviting workspace. Snape imagined that James Potter must have objected to having food and potions prepared in the same kitchen. There was a small table and a chair. On the table was an inkstand. The ink was a bone-dry black cake. A little leather notebook sat foursquare on the table, waiting forlornly to be filled with brilliant insights. Snape snatched it up and thrust it into a pocket. He stood briefly debating whether he should bother to bring the cauldron and vials to Harry. What was here was not worth all that much. Snape found himself resenting these relics of Lily's neglected talent. Let the cottage keep them. He turned away to go upstairs.

Instantly, sensible thrift overcame his qualms. Quickly, he shrank and pocketed the cauldron and rack of phials. They were very nice crystal ones. Harry could use them when he was a little more experienced. Children were always melting their cauldrons. Harry should have a spare. That done, he took the rickety steps quickly, leaving the place to darkness.

He passed the splintered newel post once more, and sneered at the blast mark. Idiot. As far as he could see, James Potter had valued Lily only for her beauty. More fool he. Albus had nattered on about ancient Blood Magic a few days ago, and now Minerva was being very tight lipped. It seemed more and more certain to him that it was Lily who had saved Harry, while Potter had indulged in futile heroics. Useless poser. Lily had always been worth ten of Potter.

When he reentered the room, he was aware of a certain tension. Probably Albus had probed a little too deeply. Minerva had turned her back to him. She saw Snape, and said nothing as she helped Snape gather up what they were removing from the cottage.

They passed down the hall, and then descended the stairs in silence. Dumbledore took the painting, shaking his head over its deplorable state. He then gestured for his two professors to precede him out of

the cottage, and he set the wards at the door. Civilly, Snape and Minerva awaited him outside the gate. The Headmaster moved very slowly, looking every year of his age and more. He shut the gate behind him, and raised the sealing ward in a momentary haze of crackling light.

He said, very low, "It was never a lucky house. Never. I was very wrong to entrust another family to it."

Being alone in a cupboard had been pretty horrible. Being alone in his new room with lots of fun things to do, Harry decided, was pretty neat. He was having a wonderful day.

At the moment, he was messing about with his art supplies and a thin book called Watercolours for the Young Artist. On the easel was his impression of the back garden: the sky a delicate wash of blue, the grass lavishly green, the flowers blobs of brilliant reds and pinks and purples. The book explained about shadows and perspective. Harry's bold yellow wall slanted away into brown shadows. The shed could barely be seen behind an explosion of shrubbery. No one in the world would call it a great painting, but Harry had never had resources like this before, and rejoiced in the possession of unlimited colour. He could draw all sorts of things--whatever he saw or imagined.

A shrill voice called from downstairs.

"Dudley darling, we have to leave now! I need you to carry the bags for me."

"Awwwww, Mum!" Rolling thunder marked Dudley's heavy tread on the stairs.

Harry smirked, and then carefully rinsed his brush before adding some more blue to the dark corner on the right. It was so strange to listen to the Dursleys living their lives on the other side of his door. Since the night Professor Snape had told off the three of them, Harry had never spoken to them or heard himself summoned. No shouts of

"Boy!" impinged on his privacy. They never spoke of him either. He had ceased to exist for them.

It would have made him unhappy, if he had cared about them. They were still there, but they no longer mattered. He wondered if it would be better to have Professor Snape put a--a--yes!--a Silencing Charm on the wall facing the upstairs hall. At night he could hear Dudley and Uncle Vernon snoring, and sometimes it bothered him. Back in his cupboard it had been very quiet at night. The night before last he had dreamed that they found his door and were coming in...

But they couldn't. Muggles couldn't see his door. In Professor Burbage's book, she wrote that muggles were blind to nearly half the world. But witches and wizards saw everything.

He scowled. He had finished the book and learned a lot. Some of it wasn't very nice. At the back of the book, there was an appendix telling all about "Notable Magical Families of Britain and Ireland." Harry had been startled to see the name Potter in there, right after "Peverell," and just before "Prince." And there weren't any Peverells anymore, and hardly any Princes. In fact, Harry was surprised at how many of those notable families had gone extinct.

It seemed to be one of the reasons the Potters were important. There was actually one of them left. Harry discovered that he would automatically have a seat on the Wizengamot when he turned fifty. The oldest families did, it seemed. They inherited their places just like the House of Lords. That was something he would worry about when the time came. It sounded like an interesting thing to do, though. Harry had found out that his dad's marriage to his mum had really stirred people up. Professor Snape had warned him that some of the "purebloods" didn't like the "muggleborns." It had been a real scandal when his dad, who came from such a famous old family, married muggleborn witch Lily Evans. There had been some sort of trouble at the wedding, even, though Professor Burbage didn't give too many details. Gatecrashers had caused a disruption, and some of the guests had been attacked and cursed--

"Blood-traitor!" That was what somebody had stood up and shouted. And then all hell broke loose. It must have been awful for Mum. And

then the war had gone from bad to worse, and they had gone into hiding, and then "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" had found them, and--

--And then Professor Burbage went on about "The-Boy-Who-Lived," and how this boy--Harry had trouble accepting that she was writing about Harry himself--had saved everybody by destroying Voldemort.

How do they know? Nobody was there but Mum and Him. And me, but I was too little to remember--much. How do they know I did it? How do they know it was even a Killing Curse he threw at me?

Harry now knew about lots of other curses and hexes. You could kill people with all sorts of spells if they were used the wrong way. Vindictus Viridian's book warned about fatal results even with things like the Bloating Belly hex. People could trip and fall if you hit them with a Jelly-Legs or a Tickling charm when they were on a staircase. Even everyday charms could injure or kill, like the Mincing Charm used in cooking.

Maybe they could tell that the Killing Curse was what he did to Mum and Dad, but they can't know the rest, because they weren't there!

It had bothered him a lot, but it didn't keep him from reading all about the Potters.

His family was really old. The Potters had been in England since before the days of King Arthur--who had been real, by the way, just like Merlin and Morgan. They had been in what was now Norfolk before muggles started writing history down. They had even ruled a chunk of it, and been very rich. Reading about the Witch-Queen Carabogdunia was like reading a fantasy novel--something he had only been able to do at school in the library. She had been a Seer and a Healer and a Judge (something Harry wondered about). People from far countries would bring treasure to her in exchange for her advice. Witches in the Potter family were very revered, and Professor Burbage wrote that it was a shame that there hadn't been a witch born to the Potters in a long time. Like a lot of pureblood families, they often only had one child, and it had happened that they had had boys for several generations. But the wizards did pretty great

stuff too. There had been four Potters who had been Headmasters of Hogwarts, and a lot of Potters had taught there. Two Potters had been Ministers of Magic, though it seemed like Potters didn't usually care much for politics. They raised magical animals, and a lot of them played Quidditch, and some of them had become Healers or Aurors.

His great-grandfather Charlus had been a wizard adventurer, and had traveled to all sort of places, fighting monsters and breaking curses. It didn't seem to be common for British wizards to do a lot of traveling, but Great-Grandfather Charlus certainly had. Professor Burbage mentioned a book about him. Harry hoped he could find a copy somewhere.

Harry took his finished gardenscape off the easel, and set the lead figure of Merlin on his desk. He would paint Merlin next. Harry studied how the colors differed depending on the light. The shadows were almost a dark blue. Where the sun hit the figure directly, it was almost white. He sketched a faint pencil outline. He could paint a cloudy sky behind Merlin, and maybe some yellow lightning bolts.

Far below, the front door closed. Aunt Petunia didn't ordinarily go to Waitrose on Sundays. She must have forgotten something. It was a long drive to Waitrose, but Aunt Petunia liked it better than any of the supermarkets in Little Whinging. She and Dudley would be gone nearly two hours, maybe more. Uncle Vernon had gone to play golf this afternoon, and was going to have dinner with his friends from work. Harry had the house to himself.

He took another look at the garden. The grass was clumpy and overgrown. Sorrel was straggling up amongst the fairy roses. The Dursleys, so quick to notice a weed amiss when they could order Harry to deal with it, were a lazy lot when they themselves might have to do the work. All his efforts were going to waste. He looked again at the garden and then grinned. He closed his paintbox, and Merlin was forgotten for the moment.

Harry burst out of his room, banging his door open.

"Yaaaaahhhhh!" he roared, waving his arms. "Yaaaaahhhhh! Wizard coming through!" He ran into Dudley's room, nearing tripping on a pile

of dirty clothes. "Oi, Dudley! I'm in your roo----oom!" He made a face and raced down the hall to the master bedroom. He ran in circles, and jumped up and down. "I'm in your room, spreading wizard cooties! Watch out!"

At top speed, he galloped down the stairs and rushed into the kitchen. Flinging the door of the fridge open with a wizardly flourish, he studied the contents for something to scrounge. Yogurt? Since when do the Dursleys eat yogurt? Shaking his head, he moved on to the cupboards, and was relieved to find a tin of shortbread. Nicking some, he strolled outside to enjoy the warm afternoon sun.

Gardening wasn't so bad when he wasn't being forced to do it. His body craved a bit of vigorous exercise. He would do this his way, and Dursleys would be left to puzzle over it. The earth crumbled moistly around his fingers as he pulled long and strong on the weeds, satisfied with the lengths of root he was getting. He tossed the weeds over his shoulder onto the scrap of front lawn. The mower would grind them up without a trace. It took less than twenty minutes to restore the front of the house to pristine condition. A neighbor across the street was digging in her own garden, and looked up to stare at him curiously. Harry gave her his most innocent smile and a friendly wave. To his surprise, the woman got up, and came over to speak to him. It startled him a little that a muggle even noticed him.

She was a nice-looking, thirtyish lady. Harry struggled to remember the name--Mrs Lamb. She was not one of Aunt Petunia's good friends. The Lambs were fairly new to the neighborhood, and Aunt Petunia disapproved of the wife because she thought a mother with young children should not be working.

"Harry, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, Mrs Lamb. I'm Harry Potter."

"I hadn't seen you for a few days, and I was wondering if--" She smiled, and then said, "It seems that you're having a good summer, Harry. I like your new look."

He was confused for a moment, and then laughed. "Oh--the contacts. Thanks. I can see much better now."

Her gaze swept over him, and he knew she also meant the new clothes that fit him. She said, "You're always outside, working so hard...When I didn't see you, I came over to ask your Aunt about you. She told me you were getting ready to go to boarding school."

"Yeah--I mean--Yes. I'm going to my parents' old school. It's going to be brilliant."

"I'm very happy for you, Harry. Your cousin isn't going to the same school, is he?"

"No, he's going to Smeltings. It's a boys' school. Uncle Vernon went there." He said, straight-faced, "They wear orange knickerbockers at Smeltings."

She laughed. "I hope you don't have to wear anything like that."

He grinned slyly. "Nothing in the least like it. It's been nice talking to you, Mrs Lamb, but I do have to finish my work before Aunt Petunia comes home."

It pleased him to know that at least one of the neighbors noticed how much he had to do. Very light of heart, he tore into the back garden. It took rather longer, because the hydrangeas needed water and the roses needed to be deadheaded. Still, he was finished in less than an hour. He put the mower and his tools away, and made a point of going back through the garage and strutting through the front door. He poured a tall glass of orange juice from the fridge and savoured it in full, rich gulps. He then washed and dried the glass and put it away in the cupboard, making sure everything looked perfectly undisturbed. And then he shrugged and nicked another piece of shortbread. He sat at the top of the stairs, waiting.

Through the front window, he saw the car drive up. Doors slammed. Dudley and Aunt Petunia were talking about the Herb-and-Citrus Chicken Dudley was going to learn to make tonight for the two of them. Harry smirked at the sight of Dudley lugging the heavy bags.

Time to go. He shot up and vanished into his room, munching the last buttery-sweet bite of shortbread. Aunt Petunia was wondering who had mowed the lawn. Harry nearly hugged himself with glee.

It was just like being a superhero. No. He was a superhero, or at least learning to be one. He had a secret hideout, and wise magical advisors training him in ancient lore. He had Muffy, his own elf, who would arrive with a "Pop!" bearing trays of delicious food, and who could clean his room with a snap of her fingers. When Harry went outside, innocent muggles like Mrs Lamb never knew that he had special powers.

And that was something he needed to discuss with Professor Snape. According to the books he was reading, it seemed like most witches and wizards were just normal people who could do magic. In their secret wizarding world, they went to work in offices or kept shops or kept house just like muggles. Most of them were pretty--ordinary. It bothered him. What was the point of being a superhero, if you didn't do amazing things?

Now Lord Voldemort--he was a pretty fair example of a supervillain. He had superpowers, but used them for killing people and seizing power, which were things all supervillains seemed to want to do. Harry had tried to find out more about Voldemort in his history book, but that didn't have anything in it past the eighteen-hundreds. Why was that? It sounded to him like there had been plenty of history recently! Lord Voldemort wasn't in *Hogwarts: a History*, either. Did supervillains go to school? He snorted at the idea, picturing a class of evil little wizard kids. His smile faded. Lord Voldemort had had followers, and it was likely that they might have children who would go to school. Was there a separate school for them?

Harry grabbed *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection* from his bookshelf. Professor Snape thought Defense against the Dark Arts was a really important subject, and had assigned a chapter for Harry to read. When he visited tonight, he would quiz Harry about it, so it was a good idea to look over it again. They were going back to Diagon Alley tomorrow, and he wanted Professor Snape to be pleased with him. It wouldn't be that hard, because the chapter was

about Dark Creatures, and it was incredibly cool. Vampires and werewolves were real. Since the book was just an introduction for first years, it only talked about what they were, and listed sensible things to do to make sure you never met one. There were no large vampire clans left in Great Britain, so the chances of meeting a vampire were not that great. There were lots of werewolves though, but you only had to worry about werewolves during the full moon. It was a good idea to keep track of lunar phases, and that tied in with astronomy.

Professor Snape said that he had a clock in his quarters that showed the phase of the moon as well as the time. Professor Snape said that one could not be too careful, where werewolves were concerned.

A.N.--Thanks again to my reviewers for their many wonderful ideas. Since a number of you have asked about the timeline, I am projecting that with communication and cooperation, Harry might be able to complete his task in three, rather than in seven years. However, there may be some issues left unresolved.

And about last chapter's scream issue. Yes, I'm afraid it really was rather a girly scream.

Chapter 15

Harry kept his grin unseen as he followed Professor Snape to Twilfit and Tattings. He had never been fussed over by anyone before. Professor Snape had arrived early in the morning, told Muffy that Harry would be lunching out, and then had made Harry change his clothes. It seemed that he was concerned that Harry might be noticed, and he wanted his charge to make a good impression. Harry's riotous dark hair was glowered at.

"It's always been like this, Professor," Harry pointed out reasonably. "Once Aunt Petunia practically shaved my head, but it was all back just like this in the morning. My hair just sticks out all over the place."

"Perhaps if it were longer..." Snape considered.

Harry shrugged. "I don't think it gets along longer than this, sir. I've never needed a haircut."

Snape only grunted, and then made Harry change his clothes again, this time into a pair of olive drab slacks and one of Dudley's very nice white dress shirts, newly sized to fit him. Harry thought it was a strange look together with his trainers, but Snape seemed to think it would be all right with some additions that they would find right away in Diagon Alley. Harry endured the unpleasantness of apparition, and instantly was looking about him at the busy wizarding street.

"Can't we go see the owls first, sir?"

"Owls after we take care of this," Snape replied, in a voice that brooked no discussion. Harry had to stretch his legs to keep up with his teacher, and in a few steps they were in the hushed environment of a shop that clearly catered to the privileged.

"Mr Potter requires a robe for street wear," Snape told the greying but debonair Mr Twilfit.

"Mr Potter!" The wizard tailor's eyes gleamed. "How well I remember your father and grandfather! They were very loyal customers--and such taste!"

Harry submitted to meticulous measuring, and then to a consideration of color and fabric, answering "Yes, I like it" and "Not so much," when his opinion was solicited. In short order, he had a summerweight robe draped over his shoulders. The light tan fabric was soft to the touch and had a kind of cape effect in back. Numerous leather-covered buttons resolved themselves, and Professor Snape and Mr Twilfit appeared satisfied with the result. Harry studied himself in the mirror, which to his astonishment expressed its own approval in a smooth, ingratiating baritone.

"Yes...now you look quite the thing. Oh, yes... I daresay even Abelard the Unctuous would feel not the slightest compunction at being seen in your company. The shoes...well...yes. A daring piece of personal style. Very modern... My dear boy, the robes are absolutely you. You wouldn't care for another set in Liverwort Green?"

"Uh--no. Not today."

"Pity. They would match your eyes to a marvel."

Professor Snape rescued him, and they left the shop, but not before Mr Twilfit told him that they would keep a record of his measurements, "As we do with all our clientele."

Harry rolled his eyes, following Professor Snape down the street. The robes were too nice to make him feel ridiculous, especially once he discovered that they billowed a bit like Professor Snape's. He tried holding his arms like the tall wizard in front of him, and found it improved the effect.

"What are you doing?" Snape asked impatiently, seeing the boy making some sort of mystical gestures.

"Nothing," Harry answered instantly, walking a little faster. "Ca--may we see the owls now, please?"

"If we must."

There were even more shoppers abroad than there had been on his last visit. Harry had never seen anything like Eeylops Owl Emporium. He had little time to stare into the shadows, for almost instantly there was a swoop of snowy feathers, and the white owl he had noticed the week before was staring him in the eye. Harry stumbled, and Snape put out a hand to support him.

"Why is it so dark in here?" he whispered.

"Most owls are nocturnal," Snape lectured. "This is more comfortable for them. The Snowy Owl, however, is not."

The shopkeeper seemed pleased. "Difficult bird to place, that one. Very choosy. Come near biting off one young chappie's nose. Seems to have taken to you, though."

Harry stroked her plumage with awe and delight. "She's gorgeous. How much is she?"

Snape reminded himself to have a talk with Harry about letting shopkeepers see how much you wanted something. The boy was absolutely transparent. Not being infatuated with the owl himself, however, he was able to rein in the shopkeeper's more exorbitant demands. In short order a price was agreed on for bird, cage, perch, and a bag of owl treats that should last two months.

"We'll retrieve the creature before we leave the Alley today," Snape said, hurrying Harry out the door. "We can tell her your address, apparate back to the house, and have everything prepared for her arrival."

Harry looked wistfully back through the shop window. "You don't suppose he'll sell her to someone else?"

"Certainly not. We made a wizard's bargain. What will you call her?"

"Hedwig." Harry had been thinking about this owl for a week, and had searched out a suitably wonderful name for her. He found what he was looking for in A History of Magic. "Her name is Hedwig."

The bootmaker was next, and Harry's boots were ready. He tried them on and was amazed at their comfort. Snape shrank and pocketed his trainers.

"You can wear the boots while we're here amongst wizards. Have a look at the bookbags here. Since you'll be using your family trunk, you can afford a decent bag."

How nice to be reminded of his new treasures. Harry had a trunk for school covered with real dragonhide: a trunk that was a family heirloom. They would go Gringotts later today, so Professor Snape could show him some of the other things of Harry's that he and Professor McGonagall had located. Buoyed at the thought, Harry took a deep breath, enjoying the rich smell of the shop. There were all sorts of leather items here: bookbags, gloves, and wand holsters. There were belts here too, and a selection of wonderful buckles, made by a wizard silversmith whom the bootmaker knew. Harry liked one shaped like an owl in flight, and then another with a pair of dragons. He was admiring them, when a boy stumbled into him, and nearly knocked him off his feet.

"Ow! Sorry!"

"Oh, Neville!" boomed an old woman's voice, "Watch yourself! You might have done the poor lad an injury, a clumsy great lump like you!"

Harry looked up and blinked. A witch, certainly: elderly, severe, and disapproving. Speechless, he noted that she had a vulture on her hat. Beside her was a bony old man no taller than herself, with a sly twinkle and a salt-and-pepper moustache. He laughed at the boy.

"It's the feet, you see. I said it, didn't I? Feet that big must go astray. Trampling on this little chap, more's the pity. You all right, lad? Neville's no featherweight, and he don't trouble to look where his big feet take him."

Harry felt sorry for the other boy. He was taller than Harry and somewhat plump, with a round, pleasant face and a hunted expression.

Harry never had liked bullies, grownup or not. Very clearly, he said, "I'm quite all right. It was just an accident. He didn't hurt me a bit." Turning to the boy, he said, "You aren't hurt, are you?"

Looking surprised, the boy simply stared at Harry until the old witch snapped testily, "Well, speak up, Neville! Don't stand there like a gormless noddy! Beg the lad's pardon!"

With a touch of asperity, Harry interrupted, "He already said he was sorry. It's all right." Trying to help the other boy--Neville--he put out his hand and blurted, "I'm Harry Potter, by the way."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Neville Longbottom." The boy was not exactly shy, but a little reserved, as if he didn't quite know what to make of Harry. He had nice manners, though, even by the standards of Professor Burbage, whose book had taught Harry a lot about how wizards were expected to behave. The boy took his hand, gave it a brief, mild shake, and then said, "This is my grandmother, Madam Longbottom, and my great-uncle, Algernon--"

Salt-and-Pepper Mustache gave Harry a wink, "Algy's the name. Algy Bagnold." Harry shook his hand, trying not to wince at the painfully tight grip, and then he almost committed the gaffe of offering his hand to Madam Longbottom. Professor Burbage wrote that a wizard was never supposed to offer to shake hands with a witch. It was up to the witch to decide if she wanted that degree of contact or not. Harry hid his hand behind his back, and then had to quickly put it out again when Madam Longbottom extended her own to him.

"How do you do, Madam Longbottom?"

The witch did not release his hand, but dragged him over for a closer look. "That's what I like to see!" she declared. "A young lad not afraid to speak up for himself. Knew your father and your grandfather--and your great-grandfather before them! Fine wizards--fine fellows! Saw your father and grandfather married. And now there's just you. The old families are thin on the ground these days. Well, you look like you'll do the Potters proud. I hope Neville learns to take a leaf from your book! What house for you, my lad?"

"Actually--" Harry began.

Great-Uncle Algy winked again. "Oh--Gryffindor! No fear! A little bit of the lion in all of the Potters, ain't there? And there he is, already scarred with battle!" He danced about like a boxer, sketching wavy little movements with his hand that Harry guessed represented spells. "Too much to hope for that our Neville will join you in the old Red-And-Gold, I reckon."

Neville's face was a study in misery. Harry knew exactly how he was feeling. "Actually," he said loudly. "I really can't say which house I'll be in. All of them have their good points. I think what's important is to make the most of your time in school, no matter which house you're sorted into."

"Well said, Mr Potter," agreed Professor Snape, who appeared quite suddenly behind Neville. "Have you chosen your bag?" He bowed with a distant air to Neville's relations. "Madam. Sir. Mr Potter has a number of purchases to make. You must excuse us."

Madam Longbottom narrowed her eyes at Snape in suspicion. "You might as well get a bookbag while you're here, Neville. Go with the Potter lad. I daresay he won't lead you astray. We'll be sitting over there."

Neville looked at Harry uncertainly. Harry said, "I saw one I liked, Professor Snape. Sir, this is Neville Longbottom. I believe he's going to be a first-year like me."

Snape nailed the boy with a forbidding stare. Neville's eyes wobbled in fright. "How do you do, sir?" he faltered. His hand jerked forward a little, but then seeing Snape standing there unmoving, it was withdrawn.

Harry took Neville by the elbow. "Over here. I saw some nice ones. Excuse us."

Snape stood back and let the two boys murmur to each other. So that was Frank and Alice Longbottom's boy. An unpromising specimen--though who wouldn't be with that gorgon of a grandmother and that

posturing imbecile with her? Her brother, he supposed. It was horribly true that one couldn't choose one's family. He had never liked Frank Longbottom. A red face and a loud voice and Hex-the-Snakes. He had been in Lucius' year, and one of his chief rivals at Quidditch. And then an Auror, of course. Snape had been taken into custody by Longbottom once, on suspicion of brewing Dark Potions. Longbottom, like all too many "peace officers" both muggle and magical, was one for putting the boot in first, and finding the evidence later, if at all. Bastard. Alice had never had any use for Snape, either, and must have taken more points from Slytherin--and Snape in particular--than any Gryffindor prefect in history. What had happened to them was hideous: but when people made such a point of showing the opposition how much they hated them, it was only to be expected that they would make themselves targets.

And of course there was the prophecy. Snape nearly laughed aloud at the idea of that pathetic Longbottom boy being a threat to the Dark Lord. Appalling as she was, Augusta Longbottom was right to see that there was no comparison between her grandson and Harry Potter.

"Black is the most practical, probably." Harry took one of them down. It was smooth and shiny, and the leather was soft as butter. He liked all the little compartments for his quills and his ink. "This one looks good."

"It's nice." Neville answered quietly. After a moment's consideration, he took down one very much like it. "Did you mean what you said about not minding what House you were in?"

"Yes. I know my parents were in Gryffindor, but I'm not them. It's important to be in the house that suits you, because that's where you'll do your best."

Neville whispered, "I've got to be in Gryffindor. My parents were Gryffindors, and all my family. It's bad enough that they think I'm practically a squib--"

Harry blinked. Professor Burbage's book had explained what a squib was, and how shameful it was to be one. "You can't be a squib if you got a Hogwarts letter. You did get one, didn't you?"

"Yes--but Gran--" The taller boy started again. "They thought I was a squib so long that they never let me out much. I've never talked to a boy my age before. It's really nice of you to help me. You must have been in Diagon Alley about a million times."

"No!" Harry protested. "It's only my second time. I didn't even know I was a wizard until last week. I've been living with my--muggle--relatives, and they never told me anything. Diagon Alley is brilliant, though," he said, not wanting to talk about the Dursleys. "Have you got your wand yet?"

Neville shook his head. "I've got to use my father's. Gran says it's a sacred trust."

"But--"

"Mr Potter!" Snape called. "If you're quite finished?"

"Coming, sir!" Harry dropped his voice to confide in the boy beside him. "Professor Snape teaches Potions. He acts really strict, but he's been very nice to me. Be sure to read the first chapter of the potions book before your first lesson. He likes to quiz people to see what they know. I've got to go--but I'll see you at Hogwarts. And remember--you don't have to be a Gryffindor, just because your parents were!" He dashed off after Snape, not hearing Neville's reply.

"But I do..."

"Should I have bought a wand holster?" Harry asked Snape, as they headed to the apothecary.

"In your first year?" Snape scoffed. "I would certainly hope you have no need for one at the ripe age of eleven! Perhaps after your O.W.L.s. You may wish to practice dueling by then."

They then spent nearly an hour in Slug & Jiggers Apothecary. Snape was very anxious that Harry have a leg up in potions class, and they looked at all sorts of ingredients, so Harry could recognize them by sight, rather than simply knowing lists out of a textbook. It was interesting, but Harry was beginning to feel a bit done in by Snape's relentless coaching. It was better when old Mr Jiggers took them into the back of the store, where they saw a whole huge dragon's liver in his cooling bin. Harry was invited to touch it, and he burst out laughing at the sheer grossness, the wet and bloody gooshiness of it all.

Snape saw that the boy had had enough for the time being, and said, "I have more business to transact here. I believe you wanted to find a book about Runes? Flourish and Blotts is only four shops away on this side of the Alley. Go there and browse, and don't leave. I'll be there presently."

"Yes, sir."

"And let me clean your hands."

Harry put out his bloody hands for a quick Scourgify, and then thanked Mr Jiggers for his time. Dashing out, he enjoyed the air and the sounds of the Alley, and the feel of his robes billowing in the breeze. Striding along, he passed Quality Quidditch Supplies, and tried not to look at the brooms. He'd know about them soon enough.

Crowds of students and parents were in Flourish and Blotts, looking for textbooks. Harry told an assistant that he already had his schoolbooks, but wanted something extra about Runes. She led him to a tall bookcase, and pointed out An Introduction to Ancient Runes. It was an appealingly thin volume, and Harry glanced through it. It seemed to be what he was looking for. Old Futhark was there, anyway. In the bookcase were all sorts of books about languages. Harry saw many he had heard of, along with others that were new to him. Mermish? As in mermaids? Looking around, he saw that "History" was not far away. He really wanted to know more about Voldemort.

It would be so embarrassing if people thought he was wanting to read about himself. He wasn't being silly, he told himself fiercely. He really needed to know what had happened. Trailing his finger along the titles, he moved past Magic in Ancient Egypt and Wizards of Sumer and Babylon, down several shelves and up again, until he was past Wizarding Life in the Victorian Age. Closer...closer...

There! Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century. Nearby were Modern Magical History, and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts. Hurriedly, he gathered up the books and crept back to the Runes section. He opened up Great Wizarding Events and skimmed the last third until he found what he wanted.

"Most abominable were the crimes of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and his just fate was no less remarkable than his misdeeds. That an infant, a child only just weaned from his mother's breast, could prove a doughtier opponent than many a battle-hardened Auror may be difficult for posterity to credit; but it unquestionably true. Little Harry Potter was utterly alone: his parents struck down in a viridian blaze. Evil Most Orgulous loomed over the martyred mother, but he reckoned not with the imponderable nature of Magic. Trusting in his own power, he discounted that of others--forgetting that even Merlin was once a babe-in-arms.

"Fittingly, the slayer of the innocent and helpless was in his turn slain by the most innocent and seeming-helpless of his victims. A mighty blast--a haunting silence. Did the Terrible Wizard realize in his last moment that The Wheel of Fortune had turned--that another power had risen to thwart his most vile intent? We may picture it--we may imagine the momentary look of astonishment and terror in those red orbs as they perceived his bane rise before him: his disbelief and horror when the Boy proved invulnerable to the Monster's Unforgivable Curse: his despair as he was banished into less than the meanest dust, and his spirit cast into the Outer Darkness from whence it came. Let those of us who suffered savour that vision, and give thanks to Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived..."

Harry made a face. The book made him sound like some sort of weird Super Baby, casting a spell to destroy Voldemort. Could he even talk then? "Curse oo, Vodamor!" Er--probably not.

He looked back through the pages, trying to find out more about Lord Voldemort. The author failed to tell a clear story. Voldemort seemed to come out of nowhere sometime late in the 'Sixties, and a lot of important people had been put under something called the Imperius Curse by him and made to do what he wanted. Apparently, though there was a lot of dancing about the issue, what he wanted was to "purify" the wizarding world of outside elements, something that quite a few people still thought needed doing.

Which really means getting rid of people like my Mum. That is so sick.

Professor Burbage hadn't been very forthcoming in her book either. It seemed to Harry that a lot of people still believed that the only real witches or wizards were the ones with magical ancestors on both sides going back a thousand years. Well, sod them.

The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts was not much better, though the language wasn't as old-fashioned. Harry guessed that it really wasn't a very good book. It told the story of seven evil wizards from ancient times to Lord Voldemort, and showed how a reliance on Dark Arts had led to the undoing of each of them. The chapter about Voldemort, once again, didn't say anything about where he came from. It just told about how evil he was and how the Dark Arts were addictive. Lord Voldemort had steeped his soul into so much evil that he couldn't understand goodness anymore. When he tried to kill a pure and innocent child, his magic backfired on him somehow, and he cast the curse on himself. This author did not think that Harry Potter had actively destroyed He-Who-Must-Be-Named (Harry was getting very tired of all the stupid hyphens), but he had played a passive role as a Perfect Sacrifice. There was a long digression about the history of blood sacrifice in olden days, when there was no other way to avert disaster but by the blood of innocents. However, the author wrote, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named showed the moral blindness common in adherents of the Dark Arts. In attempting to perform the Rite of the Perfect Sacrifice, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had presumed to play the role of the Rightful King. Only the Rightful King could shed the innocent blood of the Perfect Sacrifice to preserve the people.

And no Dark Wizard, the author declared, could ever have been a Rightful King. Not even in earliest times, when the nature of the Dark Arts, was, regrettably, far less clearly understood than in these more enlightened days.

There was another digression, all about some kid called the Infant of Prague, who could speak Latin when he was a baby and do maths. Harry yawned, and set the book aside.

Reluctantly, he paged through Modern Magical History. Boy-Who-Lived. He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named. Blahblahblahblah. This author, a witch who was writing under a penname "for personal reasons," thought that Harry had used accidental magic. She wrote that Harry was clearly an exceptionally powerful magical child, who had somehow shielded himself so strongly that the Killing Curse bounced off and hit Voldemort instead. There was even a truly creepy diagram showing Voldemort, Harry in his cot, his mother dead on the floor, and the possible angle of reflection. It seemed like the most reasonable explanation, except--

He frowned, leafing back through the book. He had done what Professor Snape called "accidental magic" in the past. He had appeared on the school roof: he had turned a teachers hair blue. Could he have shielded himself? Could he have deflected a spell that blasted Voldemort into smithereens? Somehow he doubted it. How would a baby even know he was in danger?

More importantly, he thought with a sour smile, his "accidental magic" had never really done him much good. It had never fed him when he was hungry, or summoned help when he needed it. It had taken him away from a thumping that one time, but no other. The book was stupid. All these books were stupid. How could these clever people writing these books know anything about it, when they weren't there?

There were no witnesses. Nobody had come forward, saying they had seen what happened. It was just Mum and Dad and Harry, and that rotten Voldemort. Three of them were dead, and Harry didn't remember.

Yes, you do, a voice in his head seemed to whisper. You remember a green light and a high, cold laugh.

But what exactly did he remember? Had Voldemort actually cast the curse on Harry, or did Harry just remember the light because he had seen the curse cast at his parents?

Well, there was his scar. It wasn't like a normal scar at all--not with that weird lightning-bolt shape. Yeah, Voldemort had shot something at him, but maybe Professor Snape's guess was as good as anybody's. Maybe Voldemort made a mistake. Maybe he was tired. Maybe you could only throw the Killing Curse a certain number of times before your aim was off, or you mispronounced a word. Harry liked this theory better than those that made him weird even in the magical world.

Maybe I'm immune to the Killing Curse. Super. How do I find out? Ask Professor Snape to have a go at me with it? Somehow I don't think he'd be willing. Anyway, nobody knows, no matter how much they go on and on...

The shop was getting crowded. Harry put the books back on the shelves, and then noticed a volume entitled, *The Path of Darkness*. It was a history of dark witches and wizards from prehistory to the present. The author seemed to have some sympathy for them, and talked a lot about defining "darkness" in different ways. The style was more to Harry's taste. Professor Snape was not here yet, so he looked for a place to sit and read. Someone was sitting down in his place in the Runes section. There was a vacant leather chair over in "Careers." Harry was soon engrossed in the story of the snake-priestesses of Crete. It was better than any novel Harry had ever read. Time passed, but Harry was oblivious.

"Rather bold of you to declare your career choice so publicly," said a boy.

Harry looked up. A blond boy with a pale, pointed face was smirking at him, highly amused.

"It's a terrific book," Harry admitted. "Hogwarts?"

"Of course. My father was getting my books, but he was called away. I just escaped from Madam Malkin's. What a bore! I don't recall having seen you about."

Harry knew it was bad manners to keep sitting, so he rose and offered his hand, just the way Professor Burbage said he ought to.

"I haven't been about much. I'm Harry Potter."

"Really!" The boy looked briefly impressed, and then tried to sound indifferent. He shook Harry's hand. "It's true then. Harry Potter is coming to Hogwarts. And my name's Malfoy--Draco Malfoy."

Harry wondered if his new acquaintance had ever seen a James Bond movie, and changed his grin into a smile. "Draco like the constellation? That is so cool."

The boy seemed very pleased, and puffed up a little. "Well, astronomical names are something of a tradition in my mother's family--the Blacks."

"Rather than Tom, Dick--or Harry," Harry said. "Lucky you. Have you got your wand yet?"

"No. My mother's been talking with Ollivander, but we have an appointment after lunch. I can't wait. And you?"

"I was here last week and got mine then. Mr Ollivander is a bit--strange."

"Well--that's not that unusual in powerful wizards when they reach a certain age. A lot of them go off their heads. My father says Dumbledore is all but senile himself. Still pretty powerful, though."

"That's something to look forward to."

"Dumbledore?"

"No. Still being able to blast off spells when I'm a hundred and fifty."

The blond boy laughed out loud. "So you're Harry Potter? You're nothing like I imagined."

"Sorry."

"No. I mean--you're quite--normal."

Now Harry laughed. "Not according to my aunt!"

"Where have you been all these years? It's all been very hush-hush."

"I like being a man of mystery. And I've been living with my relatives." Seeing the boy's puzzlement, Harry clarified. "My muggle relatives."

Draco's eyes widened. He stepped back a fraction. "That's right--your mother--I mean--muggles--" He leaned closer and whispered, "Are they horrible?"

"Pretty much." Then, remembering that he was not supposed to let on about his days in the cupboard to anyone, Harry added hastily, "At least my cousin. He's a fat bully. I hate bullies. We don't have a lot in common."

Draco shuddered. "I should think not. That's dreadful."

"I'm fine," Harry insisted. "Other than that, of course. My room is great, and now--"

"Draco?" a soft voice spoke close by.

Harry caught the scent of a delicious perfume before he saw the witch's face. She was very nice-looking, and very obviously Draco's mother.

"Draco?" she repeated, "who is your young friend?"

In a very formal way that Harry found rather silly, Draco gave his mother a slight bow. "Mother, may I present to you Harry Potter." He

swung out his arm in a sweeping gesture. "Harry, this is my mother, Madam Malfoy."

"How do you do, Mr Potter?" the lady asked, for Draco's mother was very much a lady. A very posh lady. She looked nice and smelled nice. Her robes swirled softly and her jewels gleamed. Harry thought that Draco was a very lucky boy to have such a mother. She was putting out a soft, white hand, and Harry tried not to claw at it in his haste to take it lightly in his own. He gave his own tiny bow.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Madam Malfoy."

"Such nice manners." She lifted his chin and pushed away the wayward fringe of black hair. "Yes, the scar. I've always been astounded that a child could have survived such violent, tragic events."

She stepped back and put an arm around Draco's shoulders. Harry experienced a brief, poignant thrill of jealousy. Last night, Professor Snape had brought him a book of pictures of his Mum, and she was so pretty. If only his own Mum could be here like Draco's--

"Surely you aren't here all alone?" she was asking.

Harry noticed Draco's eyes go wide again, and the boy looking about him, curious and rather alarmed. He thinks he's going to see a genuine muggle, Harry realized. Maybe it would do Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon good if just one time they were treated as if they were the freaks.

"No, Madam Malfoy. I'm not alone. I'm waiting for--"

"Mr Potter! There you are!"

"Professor Snape," Harry grinned.

A.N. Thanks again to my wonderful reviewers and their clever ideas!

Chapter 16

Drat the boy! There he was, talking with the very people Snape had not felt he was ready to meet. Harry needed to know a great deal more about the wizarding world before he could hold his own with the Malfoys. At least Lucius was nowhere to be seen. He would have had Harry's life story before the boy realized he had been asked a question. Narcissa and Draco were not angry or hostile, as far as he could see. If only he could have had another week to coach Harry about pureblood attitudes...

Well, he would have encountered Draco sooner or later. At least Harry was looking like a respectable young wizard today, and not like an Azkaban escapee. Snape knew that first impressions were vital. If Snape had had decent robes that first day on the train, he might not have seemed such an easy mark for Black and Potter. Yes: robes and boots of the best, no stupid taped glasses perched on his nose. A pity about the hair, but Snape would give that more thought.

Narcissa and Draco saw him enter the shop. He gave them a curt nod as he approached.

"Severus!" Narcissa granted him her most charming smile. "So you are in loco parentis for Mr Potter today? I confess myself surprised. I thought Dumbledore might have given the honor to one of his--favourites."

Harry smiled broadly, clearly happy to see him. Snape noticed he had some books--evidently the Rune guide he had wanted. He answered Narcissa coolly. "As it happens, Dumbledore had no say in the matter. I have known Harry's aunt since we were children together. She appointed me her proxy for wizarding affairs."

"Professor Snape's been teaching me about the wizarding world," Harry told them proudly. "It's been great."

Draco was favorably impressed by Potter's praise of a wizard he rather liked himself. He had wondered why they hadn't seen much of the Professor lately. He'd been with Potter, then, and the two of them

seemed to be getting on famously. Conversely, that Professor Snape was in charge of Harry Potter raised the older wizard quite a bit in his estimation. Father had talked about how important Potter was likely to be in the future. "Do try to make friends with him, Draco. He's the darling of the wizarding world, and he could be a very useful young man to know."

He began making calculations. The Professor dined with them occasionally. Maybe if they asked him to dinner, he could be persuaded to bring Potter along, and he and Draco could spend some time together. Potter had been living in some muggle hovel, and Draco could show him how proper wizards lived. He tried to remember the things Potter had said to him. Potter liked reading. Potter was interested in the history of the Dark Arts. Maybe Potter was interested in the Dark Arts themselves. That was very interesting to Draco. Potter didn't like his muggle cousin, which showed he wasn't an idiot or a muggle-lover. What had he said? His cousin was a fat bully, and he didn't like bullies. Maybe Potter's cousin pushed him around...

Mother, clever Mother, was already making the first moves. "We were going to lunch here in the Alley today, to celebrate Draco getting his first wand. Would you care to join us?"

Snape glanced at Harry, who did not seem at all reluctant. Of course the boy was a bit lonely, spending so much time studying in his room. Naturally he wanted to be with a boy his own age. Snape wondered which was worse: playing games with Narcissa and Draco, or putting up with the deadly dullness of the Longbottom boy. At least Narcissa was easier on the eyes than Augusta Longbottom and her ghastly hat.

And perhaps--just perhaps--it might do Draco good to meet a boy from a different background. Draco was clever enough, but had only known one sort of people with one way of thinking his entire life. If Snape could mediate the inevitable clashes, possibly Draco might learn not to parrot all the most offensive talking points of the pureblood hard-liners.

"We do have quite a number of errands today, but perhaps--" Harry was looking very pleased and excited. Snape hoped that the boy

would remember some of his lessons in table manners. A faux pas there would offend Narcissa more than if he cursed a puppy. Draco, too, was smiling brightly.

"Yes," Snape decided. "Thank you for inviting us, Narcissa. Will Lucius be joining us?"

"Poor Lucius!" Narcissa mourned mockingly. "He was called away by the Minister. Apparently there is some difficulty with next year's budget for St. Mungo's."

"The Minister is always asking my father for advice," Draco informed Harry importantly. "He says Father's absolutely indispensable."

"Really?" Harry replied, trying not to sound annoyed. Draco was certainly full of himself. "That's--great."

Narcissa shot Draco a faint, warning glare that missed its mark. She sighed to herself, and said, "We had planned to buy Draco's books and then his potions supplies and equipment. We could meet you around a quarter past noon. Would that be convenient?"

"Perfectly," Snape told her. "We have a brief stop to make at Gringotts. Where did you want to lunch? The Leaky Cauldron?"

Narcissa looked pained. "Oh, Severus, that's such a cliché. Tradition is all very well, but it's not my favorite place, and it's bound to be crowded with all sorts, especially this time of year. Do let's go to Summerisle's."

"Let's!" Draco chimed in, his affectations forgotten in his enthusiasm. He told Harry. "They have absolutely the best desserts there."

"Dessert is my favourite food," Harry declared agreeably

"Right then," Snape decided. "At a quarter past at Summerisle's. Did you find what you were looking for here, Mr Potter?"

Draco snorted a laugh. Snape turned and raised a brow at him.

"Interesting reading for the Boy-Who-Lived," Draco smirked.

Harry didn't understand the fuss at all. "I found a book about Runes, sir, and I thought this looked interesting." He showed Snape the two books. He looked back at Draco and said, "What? I like ancient history. The stuff in here about Crete is really neat. They used to have this ritual where boys and girls would dance around a bull and do tumbling tricks and try not to get killed--"

Snape's brows nearly met his hairline at the sight of *The Path of Darkness*.

Narcissa saw the title and smiled, giving Snape a conspiratorial look. "What a pity Lucius isn't here," she said airily. "He thinks that a rather good book too."

Snape rolled his eyes. The two of them knew perfectly well that Lucius was the author, under the nom-de-plume Geoffrey Froissart. Since Draco had shown himself lacking in discretion up to now, he had not been let in on the secret. The book's sympathetic view of Dark Arts as an alternative wizarding tradition was not a politically correct one at the moment. That said, Snape thought the book well-researched and well-written, for what it was. And there were some very rare illustrations. The Malfoys, after all, had probably the best Dark Arts library in Britain as a resource, and Lucius had had access to the *Durmstrang Library* as well.

"Go ahead and pay for the Runes book. I'll pick this up another day for you. Anything referencing the Dark Arts might cause comment." When Harry looked ready to object, Snape only said, "We'll discuss it later."

"Draco, darling, do try to summon up some tact," Narcissa suggested. They were on their way to the apothecary, and she was attempting to conceal her exasperation from the public eye.

"What's wrong?" Draco wondered. "I was just teasing him. He wasn't put out. If The-Boy-Who-Lived secretly fancies the Dark Arts, he'll have to expect a few jabs."

"That's not at all what I meant. And don't gossip to anyone else about his reading material. I'm glad Severus is more broad-minded than some people. I meant you going on about your father, in that way we've talked about."

"I wasn't going on about him," Draco contradicted. "I just told Potter that the Minister relied on Father. That's no more than the truth. I want Potter to know how important we are."

Narcissa pulled him aside, with the pretext of smoothing his bright hair, a sweet smile on her face. Her whisper was sharp and to-the-point, however. "Use your brain, Draco! How do you think Harry Potter likes hearing you boasting about how wonderful your father is--when he's an orphan himself? He might have thought you were taunting him about his parents being dead!"

"I wasn't--er--Oh." Draco grimaced, and jerked his head away. "I suppose I see."

"And watch your tone with me. I've told you a thousand times that I don't like the way you swagger about with other boys, talking in that insufferable way. It's all very well with Vincent and Gregory, but any boy with a full set of wits won't stand it for a minute."

"Father always talks that way." Draco sulked.

"Your father is a grown wizard and the head of the family." She added tartly, "And sometimes he's insufferable, too. It's utterly unacceptable from an eleven-year-old boy, so I don't want to see it at lunch. Talk about quidditch, talk about what you think your favorite subjects will be--but don't patronize Harry Potter, and don't brag about your family and what we have. It may impress him, but not at all favorably."

"Oh very well," Draco grumbled. "I'll be all dewy-eyed and modest. I don't know what why you're fussing so. Harry's nice enough, but he's only a halfblood, when all's said and done."

Narcissa put her arm about his shoulders, and dug her nails into his left arm as they walked down the Alley together. Draco knew better than to wince.

"Listen to me," she said grimly. "There are halfbloods--and then there are halfbloods. Harry Potter is the hero of the wizarding world. He is not the child of some muggle. His father was the heir to one of the most venerable wizarding lines in Britain. His mother may have been a mudblood--and by the way, you'd be wise not to use that term in the boy's hearing--but she was still a witch, and she was quite a powerful witch and quite beautiful. Clever, too, to get James Potter to actually marry her. Harry Potter may be a halfblood, but if he marries properly, his children won't be. In fact, if you had a sister--" She paused, and gave a faint sigh. "--but you don't. Just as well. Lucius might not be so tolerant. Anyway, Draco, all sorts of people will be after a piece of Harry Potter. I want to be certain that we get our rightful share."

"I want you to see what we found at the cottage," Snape said to Harry, as they headed to the Gringotts cart. "I brought what you can use right away last night, but it will be good for you to know that you have other some family things."

"Those pictures are great." Harry grinned. "I don't feel so bad about being short since I saw those pictures of you, sir. You were pretty small when you went to Hogwarts, too. Maybe I'll grow someday."

"I daresay you will," Snape replied. "That is why you have your nutrient potions every morning. It will help your bones make up for years of inadequate sustenance."

They were off, whizzing through the caverns. Harry gave himself up to the fun of it all, not trying to talk. He was looking forward to lunch, too, even though Draco was a bit stuck-up. His mother was nice, anyway. Maybe Draco hadn't talked much to other boys, like Neville at the boot shop. Harry would give him another chance.

After all, it proved not so hard. Draco was as hungry as he was. They entered a very posh, very nice establishment across the Alley from Ollivander's. It was decorated with beautiful landscape murals, in which the figures moved. Harry was glad that he had been prepared for that. He would hate to look ignorant in front of Draco and his mother.

He was still dazed at the things he had seen at Gringotts. The china and silver and robes he did not care about so much, though he guessed he might be glad to have them someday. But the family grimoire and the school things that had belonged to his parents--and those amazing jewels! Somehow his family had become real to him, and he no longer felt such an outsider as they were shown to a table draped in the finest white linen, and plied with an astonishing array of what Madam Malfoy called "amuse-bouches."

He had never had elf-made ginger wine, but apparently it was something that young wizards drank on special occasions. Draco was very excited about it, and Harry agreed after the first sip. It was warming and icy and sweet and flowery all at once. Professor Snape and Madam Malfoy had a bottle of something French between them.

"Confess you're glad you came here, Severus," Narcissa demanded lightly, sipping from an iridescent goblet. "This is infinitely better than a jug of Chateau Leaky Cauldron."

Snape snorted. "One doesn't go to the Leaky Cauldron to drink wine."

Harry had never been in any place so posh. He was a little nervous, but kept his hands under control, and watched Professor Snape when he was unsure of how to go about eating things. His food from Hogwarts was always delicious, but not as complicated as the things here.

"So, Mr Potter--or may I call you Harry?" asked Madam Malfoy.

Harry swallowed hastily, and said, "Please do--"

"So, Harry, what are you looking forward to most at Hogwarts?"

He gave that a bit of thought. "I guess I'm really looking forward to being in a school where everyone else has magic. I've always been alone that way. And I want to learn heaps. What about you, Draco?"

"I'm really looking forward to seeing Hogwarts for myself. Everyone says it's terribly impressive. And I want to play quidditch."

"My son, the quidditch fanatic," Narcissa sighed fondly. "No brooms this year, Draco. How are you going to console yourself?"

"With potions," Draco told Snape. Then he thought about how that sounded. "Er--I mean--studying and learning how to make potions. In Potions class. Not taking them. Eeww."

The adults laughed a little, and Draco joined in ruefully. Harry did too, once he understood.

"I think I'll like potions, too. Professor Snape and I had a good time at the apothecary today. Mr. Jiggers had a whole dragon's liver in back, and I--"

"Perhaps not now, Mr Potter," Snape suggested mildly.

"Sorry," Harry blushed. "But it was really interesting. Transfiguration is interesting, too. Defense Against the Dark Arts is pretty important. And I like Runes."

"I thought you couldn't take Runes until third year," Draco remarked.

"You can't," Snape told him.

"There's no reason I can't read ahead," Harry insisted. "Runes are amazing. You can do all sorts of things with them."

Narcissa was interested. "A very old form of magic. I didn't take Runes myself, but Lucius did, of course. So you are an insatiable reader, Harry," she teased gently. "Do I divine Ravenclaw in your future?"

Harry blushed again, and lowered his eyes. Madam Malfoy really was very pretty, and he was not accustomed to the attentions of lovely women. "I don't know, Madam Malfoy. I've read about the houses, and there's a lot to be said for each one. I really can't say where I'll go. I want to go where I'll do well and make good friends."

"You should be in Slytherin!" Draco said with smothered excitement. "I know I'll be there. It's the best, and Professor Snape is our Head of House!"

"I wouldn't mind," Harry allowed. "I just don't know if I'm ambitious enough for Slytherin. But then," he laughed uncertainly, "I don't know that I'm smart enough for Ravenclaw or loyal enough for Hufflepuff or brave enough for Gryffindor. I'll just go where I'm sorted. After all, wherever I am, I'll still be at Hogwarts, and that's the whole point."

"Very true," Narcissa said smiling. A sweet boy. She would wager serious money on Ravenclaw, since he had thought it though so objectively.

Draco was not so satisfied. "I still say Slytherin's the best. All my friends will be there, and there won't be any of the wrong sort--"

Snape was ready to intervene, but Harry, energised by ginger wine and good food, said, "I know I'm new to all this, but I can't say I've liked some peoples' attitudes about the houses. When I was at Madam Malkins, there was a boy there who said he'd just leave Hogwarts if he were put in Slytherin."

Narcissa tutted sympathetically, and Draco scoffed.

Harry kept his eyes on his plate, and added. "It bothers me that everybody makes such a big deal of it. I think wizard--and witches--should stick together. There aren't that many of us, after all. The more there are of us, the stronger we are. We shouldn't be fighting each other when there are millions of muggles out there who'd be happy to be rid of the lot of us--and they wouldn't know Slytherin from Gryffindor!"

Their next course was served: bewildering, exquisite. Narcissa eyed it with approval and answered soothingly, "That's so true, Harry. There's nothing more important than protecting our world from muggles. We certainly wouldn't want to share Hesperides truffles with them. There--yes, that. Try them!"

It was a strange way to have lunch, Harry thought, but very pleasant. Lots of bites of interesting things to be shared amongst them. Some of the offerings did not quite look like food to him, but they tasted wonderful.

Draco was restless, and began talking about dessert again. "Mother, may I take Harry over to the display? I daresay he's never seen anything like it!"

"Why not? You don't object, do you, Severus?"

"Go ahead, but don't linger too long. We don't want Draco to be late getting his wand."

The two boys dashed away, Harry right behind Draco.

"Come on!" the blond boy pulled on Harry's sleeve. "You've got to see this!"

"And don't run!" Snape called after them irritably.

Harry slowed as the windowed wall appeared before him, heaped with confections of snowy white and chocolate brown, some so light that the puffs of meringue floated in the air, some resting lazily on cushions of custard. Lucent jellies oozed between layers of cream sponge: crystallized fruits glittered like jewels.

"The muggles have a story about a witch who lived in a gingerbread house," Harry breathed. "But this is a fairy palace."

Draco nodded sagely, his eyes on the wall. "Yes, they always keep a few fairies about. They're quite decorative and really perfectly clean in their habits."

"Real fairies?"

"Of course. Look under the spun sugar."

"I see!"

"I'm rather fond of gingerbread myself, but living in a gingerbread house? Pretty impractical, those muggles."

"She used it to lure children. Then she killed them and ate them."

Draco stared at Harry in horror. "That's disgusting! Muggles really hate us."

"It's just an old story. Maybe somebody met a bad witch once. There are good and bad muggles, after all. There must be good and bad witches and wizards."

A sullen grunt. "The muggles must have mistaken a hag for a witch. Idiots."

"Draco, have you ever actually met a muggle?"

"No! And I don't care to! Which one do you want of these? Those are really good. They're called The Fairy's Kiss. And that's a Sorcière Brulée."

"I like the plate with the three little samples on it."

"That is nice. It's called the Judgement of Paris. You know--after the muggle prince who had to judge between three witches and started the Trojan War." He gestured at the three delicate pastries. "The cream puff is Aphrodite, the treacle tart is Athena, and the chocolate cake is Hera."

"I thought the Trojan War had gods and goddesses in it."

Draco puffed up importantly. "It's shockingly clear that you've been forced to live like a muggle. Everyone knows that what the Greeks called gods were a clan of witches and wizards who ran things there

until the Greeks started asking too many questions."

"I'll have to get a book about it."

"Some of it's in that Path of Darkness book you were looking at. You really do need to be a Slytherin, reading such things. I trust you were joking about Hufflepuff. If you were sorted there, everyone might wonder if you're a duffer like the rest of them."

"I hope if I were sorted there, people would wonder if they'd been wrong all along about Hufflepuff. Anyway, let's get back and tell them what we'd like!"

The desserts were even better than they looked. Harry took his time, savoring every bite. Draco let him try a spoonful of his Witch Hazel Fantasy.

"You're so thin, Harry," Narcissa smiled. "Perhaps you need another dessert."

Ashamed to seem greedy, Harry shook his head. "If I ate like this every day, I'd be as fat as my cousin Dudley!"

"Harry hates his muggle cousin," Draco blabbed to the world at large.

Snape fixed Harry with a scowl, and Harry backtracked sheepishly. "I don't exactly--well--he's totally spoiled and an awful bully, but what can I do? He's the only cousin I have."

Narcissa was distracted enough from her Fairy's Kiss to give Harry a considering look. "That's--not entirely true, Harry. I believe--let's see--my father was your grandfather's--yes! I happen to be your third cousin, once removed. You and Draco are fourth cousins."

Harry beamed at Draco, who smirked with great satisfaction. "That's so neat!" Harry said. "I didn't think I had any relatives but Aunt Petunia and her family."

"I told you," said Snape, "that everyone in the British wizarding world is related, one way or another."

"Except the mu--muggleborn," Draco pointed out, stuttering so slightly that Harry did not catch what he had almost said. Draco gave his mother a nervous glance. "I daresay that's why they don't fit in--most of the time."

"Professor Snape said that somebody had suggested that muggleborn students have a special class in wizarding customs," Harry contributed innocently. "I think that's a great idea. I wish I could take a class like that."

Very pleased with her new acquaintance, Narcissa smiled sweetly at Harry over the rim of her wineglass. "I'll have to tell Lucius you approve, Harry. The class was his idea."

A.N.--Thanks once again for the wonderful, inventive reviews. I'll write more than a note about my views on the Malfoys next week, but I can't do justice to the subject and get the chapter out tonight. No, I'm not making them "good." I've never written "good" Malfoys. However, I'm not interested in cackling villains. I'm exploring the possibility that in a different situation, their behavior is capable of some modification. I also detest the idea of eleven-year-old "bad guys."

No, the Witch Hazel Fantasy did not contain witch hazel. Hazelnut mousse. Love it.

Chapter 17

Snape wondered what Dumbledore would think of the dinner engagement at the Malfoys' this coming Friday night. He considered forbidding Harry ever to speak of it, but then decided to brazen it out. After all, why shouldn't Harry visit his closest wizarding relations? As long as Harry was not tempted to divulge anything further about his living arrangements, there was little the Malfoys could do to get hold of him.

And after observing the boys together, Snape was not too worried about Draco's influence on Harry. The boy, otherwise so innocent and guileless, had taken Draco's measure rather quickly, and seemed more likely to influence Draco himself. It was the Malfoy boy who had seemed more anxious for the acquaintance.

"He's as spoiled as Dudley," Harry remarked. "He's not nasty to me, though. I'd like to see Malfoy Manor. Madam Malfoy is very nice-looking, don't you think?"

Ah, Narcissa. Snape sighed, feeling himself at fault. Showing the boy those pictures of Lily had softened Harry's motherless heart, and made him vulnerable to the first appealing maternal figure who presented herself. Narcissa really could be very charming, but Snape never forgot she was Bellatrix Lestrange's sister. Before they gave the Malfoys the home advantage, Snape would brief Harry thoroughly on the Blacks and Malfoys. While he knew no real crimes that could be laid at Narcissa's door, he knew that much of her behavior today was driven by ambition.

On the other hand, perhaps it's better to have Draco as a cordial relation, than to make an enemy from the very beginning. Snape had made permanent, mortal enemies during his very first journey on the Hogwarts Express. That level of conflict was not something he would want for Harry. The Dark Lord still had supporters, but why should the boy be used as a lightning rod to unite them? Better to neutralise them as far as possible. One's school years were hard enough without becoming involved in dangerous political intrigue.

Yes. He liked the idea. If Draco and Harry got on fairly well, Lucius would be unlikely to move openly against Harry Potter.

Though Lucius, too, needed watching. He could be charming enough himself, and since his father Abraxas' illness and withdrawal from public view, was spreading his influence very widely in his new role as head of the Family Malfoy. It was not the sort of charm, however, that Snape thought Harry likely to succumb to. In his questions about his family, he seemed less interested in James--less interested in father figures as a whole. It was a mother that Harry longed for, and friends his own age. While Harry obviously liked Minerva McGonagall a great deal, it was very much a teacher/student relationship--or perhaps that of an obedient nephew with a strict but kind-hearted great-aunt. Snape hoped that Harry would find a mother figure and friends of more reliable substance than the Malfoys.

But the boys had gotten on well enough for an hour or so. Draco had restrained his arrogance, and had shown some consideration in talking to Harry. Harry, for his part, had had a good lesson in polished wizarding manners.

"We've a few more people to meet," Snape remarked. "One more errand, and then we'll return to Eeylops for your owl's things. The Headmaster wanted me to introduce you to someone at the Leaky Cauldron."

It was this part of the day that Snape was most uneasy about. Dumbledore always had reasons for the errands he arranged. Sometimes they were unpleasant reasons, and sometimes they were impenetrably secret. Sometimes Snape thought that the Headmaster was impossibly wrong-headed, as he had been about Harry's family situation. Nonetheless, the Headmaster had many sources of information and often knew even more than he pretended to.

And therefore, Harry and Snape were on their way to the most famous public house in the British wizarding world. Snape would make a point of showing Harry how to access the Alley, so it was not a futile quest. But why had Dumbledore demanded it? Why did Harry have to meet Hagrid today? And why so publicly? Why couldn't the happy reunion wait until Harry came to Hogwarts?

The half-giant was a kindly creature--no one knew that better than Snape himself--and no doubt would be over the moon to make much of Harry Potter. The worst of Hagrid was his irrational Gryffindor bias. No doubt he would fill Harry's ears with the exploits of his parents and the glory of the Lion House. Snape ardently hoped that pushing Harry that hard toward Gryffindor would be as counterproductive as Draco's efforts to urge Harry to be in Slytherin. Harry really did not like to be told with whom he should associate. It was possible that his years as an outcast had made him unwilling to hear others described as beneath his notice.

They stepped through the passage, and Snape pointed out the bricks that they would need to touch on their return. Then he opened the door, and ushered Harry into the dark and smoke-filled establishment. His nose filled with the familiar smells: good beer and plenty of it; sickly-sweet tobacco; Irish stew richly simmering, available at any hour of the day or night; a mild fog from crowding witches and wizards of uncertain hygiene.

The usual suspects lined the long, battered bar.

Harry looked about him eagerly. In some ways, this was the strangest place yet. He had never been inside a muggle pub, and had no way of knowing how this differed from them. He suspected that the clientele alone was pretty unique.

The biggest man Harry had ever seen was at the bar: a man with a shaggy mane of hair a wild, tangled beard. Harry's eyes widened at the sight of him, but Professor Snape was already whispering in his ear. "That is Hagrid, the groundskeeper at Hogwarts. Don't mind the appearance--he's very kind. And very fond of you--he's the one who rescued you from the wreckage on the night of the attack."

A firm hand gave his shoulder a push, and Harry went forward to be introduced.

"Hello--" he began shyly.

"Harry!" The giant sloshed his schooner of ale in a shower of foam, slamming it down on the bar. He strode forward like a mountain, beaming like the sun, arms spread wide in greeting. "Harry! Here yeh are!"

The witches and wizards within earshot turned and stared. Their voices rustled, rumbled, and then grew to a clamor.

"Harry?"

"Harry?"

"Do you think?"

"Look at the scar!"

"Bless my soul!" shrieked a witch. "It's Harry Potter!"

As one, the crowd surged toward Harry. He stood his ground, and let Professor Snape protect him.

"COULD YOU PLEASE MAUL HIM ONE AT A TIME?" Snape shouted. "IF IT'S NOT TOO MUCH TROUBLE!"

Somewhat abashed, the rush paused, and Hagrid was able to speak to him first. He engulfed Harry in an embrace that squashed the boy's face against a horn button on the rough leather coat--somewhere around waist level.

"Hagrid, I don't think he can breathe," Snape remarked.

"Oh! Sorry!" Hagrid pushed him free and stood looking him over, wreathed in smiles. "Look at yeh! When I last saw yeh, yeh was just a little baby! And now, here yeh are, ready for Hogwarts!"

The giant produced a huge pocket handkerchief and blew his nose like a tuba. "Yeh've got yer mum's eyes."

Snape decided to observe the forms, and give the kind-hearted giant a bit of public validation. "Harry, this is Hagrid, Keeper of the Keys at Hogwarts. There isn't much he doesn't know about the forest hard by the castle and the magical creatures that live there."

"That's right decent of yeh, Professer!" Hagrid blushed, and muttered, "Shouldn'ta shouted out his name like that..."

"That's all right, Hagrid," Harry told him. "I'm very happy to meet you--again!"

Others were pushing forward to shake his hand. The barkeeper himself, a bald and toothless old man, had tears in his eyes.

"Welcome back, Mr Potter, welcome back!"

A grey-haired witch pushed forward. "Doris Crockford, Mr Potter. I can't believe I'm meeting you at last."

"So proud, Mr Potter. I'm just so proud."

"Always wanted to shake your hand--I'm all of a flutter."

"Delighted, Mr Potter. Just can't tell you. Diggle's the name--Dedalus Diggle."

Harry shouted back, "I've seen you before! You bowed to me once in a shop!"

"He remembers!" cried Diggle, looking around proudly. "Did you hear that? He remembers me!"

Harry shook hands again and again. Doris Crockford wanted to come back for more until Snape glared at her.

The barkeeper asked Hagrid, "Can I get you another of the usual, then, to celebrate the day?"

"Can't, Tom," Hagrid shook his head, clapping his hand on Harry's shoulder until Harry's knees buckled. "Just stayed to see this young

feller again after all these years! I'm on Hogwarts business, yeh know. Very important! But here's someone yeh should meet, Harry!" He gestured broadly, urging a pale young man wearing a purple turban to come forward. "Professor Quirrell! Over here!" he shouted. "Harry, Professor Quirrell will be one of yer teachers at Hogwarts."

Harry put out his hand, but Quirrell had a pint mug in one hand, and a sandwich in the other. "S-s-s-sorry!" stammered the young man, and the two of them bowed to each other instead. "P-P-Potter! C-C-Can't tell you how p-leased I am to meet you."

"What do you teach, Professor Quirrell?"

"D--Defense Against the D--DDark Arts," muttered Quirrell, with a nervous glance at Snape. "N-Not that you nneed it, eh, P--P--Potter? He looked back at Harry, directly into his eyes.

Harry hissed, and clutched his hand to his forehead. "Ow!" he cried, seeing spots before his eyes. A shocking pain in his head surged like water over a dam, and he collapsed to the floor. Pandemonium reigned. The crowd pressed forward, wanting to know what had happened to their hero.

"Hagrid!" Snape shouted, "Let's get him out of here!"

"GET BACK!" Hagrid roared. He swept Harry up in his trunk-like arms and pushed his way through the mob.

Tom, the barkeeper, was waving them to the staircase. "Too much excitement for one little lad. Enough to make anyone come over queer! Here now! Let him have a bit of a lie-down upstairs!"

Harry's eyes opened quite suddenly. Professor Snape was looking down at him. Harry blinked and realized that he was in a strange room, lying on a strange bed. Faint sounds came from downstairs, and faint smells of beer and stew.

"We're still at the Leaky Cauldron?" he guessed. Snape nodded gravely. Harry blinked again, and asked, "What happened?"

Snape narrowed his eyes. "That's what I'd like to know. Are you all right?"

"Never better. I feel fine," Harry insisted, seeing Snape's disbelief. "My head hurt really bad all of a sudden, but it's gone now."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah--I mean, yes, sir."

"Where did your head hurt?" Snape scowled, looking the boy over.

Harry reached up, rubbing his forehead uncertainly, then finding the familiar raised tissue. "My scar, sir. It hurt horribly, like being stabbed with a knife. It never did before."

Snape said nothing for a moment. Then: "Your scar never hurt before? Never?"

"Well," Harry temporized, "I guess it probably hurt a lot when I got it, but no, not since then."

"Let's have a look." He took Harry's head in one hand, and pushed back the untidy hair with the other. Lightly he touched a fingertip to the scar, and nearly jumped out of his skin as he felt the tingling ghost of a familiar pain in his Dark Mark. An involuntary hiss escaped him. What the bloody hell is this?

"Are you all right, Professor?"

Deeply alarmed, Snape struggled to master his face. This was no ordinary scar. But I knew that already. Curse scars can be very peculiar. But this-- With sickening dread, Snape realized that something in Harry's scar must link him to the Dark Lord. How is this possible? Does Albus know? With an expression that was more grimace than smile, Snape released Harry, and brushed the black hair down over the eerie lightning bolt shape.

"It doesn't hurt now? Do you feel anything at all?"

"No, sir. I'm all right now. I'm sorry I made such a fuss. It really did hurt, though."

Snape gave a long sigh. He was going to have to discuss some of this with Dumbledore. He had not seen Quirrell since his return from abroad, but something was wrong with the man. What was that stammer? And the purple turban?

He had taught Muggle Studies for several years, before persuading Dumbledore to let him have a go at DADA. He had taken a year's sabbatical for research, and Snape had heard nothing much from him in that time, and not much through Dumbledore either. Charity Burbage had taken the Muggle Studies chair, and was a great improvement, in Snape's opinion. Whatever had happened to Quirrell, the change was very much for the worse.

The scar, though. This in itself was not good. This could be very, very bad, in fact. This merited some serious research of his own.

Harry slid off the high, broad bed and went to the window. The room faced back, giving a wonderful view of Diagon Alley below. "Hagrid already left?" he asked, sorry that he hadn't had more time to speak to the friendly giant.

"A few minutes ago. He carried you upstairs and remarked that you didn't weigh much more than the last time. He hung over your bed like a heartbroken dog, until I told him I'd owl him with your condition. He had his important Hogwarts business to transact."

Under his calm words, Snape was seething. The revelation that Harry's scar was still full of Dark Magic had made him feel off-balance and edgy. There were things going on that he knew nothing about. What was Dumbledore thinking, to make such a show of what Snape thought should be utterly secret?

Dumbledore had told them that his sources had indicated that unpleasant things had been occurring in the forests of distant

Albania--unpleasant things that now seemed to be moving north. Dumbledore was convinced it was the Dark Lord manifesting himself. He had a plan to lure out whatever remained of that monster, and to do it he needed something that no one who craved immortality could ignore.

And he had sent Hagrid to fetch it! Of course, Hagrid couldn't keep a secret if his life depended on it. Snape understood that well enough--bait was useless unless it was openly displayed. But to involve Harry! Why today? Am I wrong? Is the bait Harry, and not--

Surely not. The Dark Lord might have unfinished business with Harry Potter, but surely Dumbledore would not put an eleven-year-old boy at risk...

Snape scowled, thinking it was, in fact, entirely likely. Dumbledore would do whatever was necessary to put an end to the Dark Lord. Damn Albus. There must always be wheels within wheels where Albus Dumbledore is involved.

"There's Hagrid!" Harry exclaimed, pointing out the window. "Why does he carry an umbrella?"

"He always does. I think--" Snape thought truth was best here. "--Well, the fact is that Hagrid was expelled when he was a student, but Dumbledore kept him on as gamekeeper. Dumbledore is a great one for second chances." Especially if it creates a sense of obligation, he thought sourly. "I believe he keeps the bits of his old wand in the umbrella."

"What did he do to get expelled?" Harry asked, anxious to know what he must avoid doing.

"I'm really not sure," Snape lied. "I believe that whatever it was, Dumbledore felt the evidence did not warrant such a punishment."

Harry was still looking out the window. "And there's Professor Quirrell!" He leaned out of the window, looking carefully. "He looks like he's following him."

"He? Who?" Snape strode to the window and looked where Harry was pointing. Quirrell was walking slowly, and would have seemed unnoticeable from street level. Hagrid, of course, was easy to follow: the shaggy head looming far above everyone else. The half-giant turned in at Gringotts. After a moment, Quirrell slipped in behind him.

"He was going to Gringotts," Harry said, thinking aloud. "He said he had Hogwarts business. Do you think Professor Quirrell really was following him? It looked like it."

"Harry." Snape took the boy by the shoulder and turned him towards himself. "Whether he was or not is none of your business. If there is anything untoward going on, I will look into it and discuss it with the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall. It's nothing for you to worry about. Do you understand me?"

"But--" Harry saw Snape's frown, and capitulated. "Yes, sir." To himself he promised, I may not worry about it, but I can think about it! Aloud he said, "Hagrid seems nice. I hope I'll see him at Hogwarts."

"I daresay he'll invite you to tea. Don't eat the rock cakes."

A.N. Short. I know, but I needed to stop here, for now. I've had so many interesting reviews about Harry's financial situation. Evidently, it's something that people strongly empathize with. Yes, the idea of an orphaned Harry with limited means is disturbing, which is why I wrote it. However, I have had some very good remedies suggested. A number of you have brought up the whole issue of Harry receiving presents or bequests. It's clear to me that Harry's mail must have been held or otherwise tampered with over the years, because there would certainly, at the very least, have been birthday and Christmas cards. I will give the issue some thought, and try to find a way to incorporate it. And yes, childless witches and wizards might well name him as a beneficiary. Very true.

And then there is the issue of whether an eleven-year-old can genuinely be a "bad guy." Some of you feel that Tom Riddle was. I disagree, to a certain extent. An unbiased reading of Dumbledore's

conduct to Tom in HBP shows absolutely appalling neglect and a horrifying lack of empathy the part of Dumbledore. Because he does not like this boy, Dumbledore lets him go to Diagon Alley alone and unprotected. Hello? Knockturn Alley, anyone? It's clearly not a safe place, especially for the uninitiated. Tom is certainly a very disturbed child, very much in need of help. Does he get it? Uhh--no. Dumbledore "watches" him. What the hell good does that do? Does he warn the Headmaster and the other staff that they have a boy who kills animals and harms other children, when it is clearly his duty to do so? Uh--no. Does he treat Tom with the smallest bit of compassion? No--he terrorizes him, undoubtedly fostering Tom's obsession with being so powerful that no one else could harm him. Laume wrote an interesting story in which Dumbledore behaves like the experienced educator he pretends to be. It's very good, and very illuminating. So, no. While Tom had graduated to "bad guyness" by the age of sixteen--and while I understand the arguments made that he was already unsalvageable by eleven--I don't think calling an eleven-year old a villain is justified. JKR giving him a backstory displaying his "bad blood"--his rotten ancestry-- I find objectionable. It's very hypocritical to depict the purebloods as wicked and stupid, when the author herself seems to feel that ancestry is usually (though not always) destiny. Yes, Harry and Tom were both orphans, but Harry's parents were "good" people, and Tom's were not. Thus, I suppose, Harry's natural "goodness."

And note that nowhere does anyone ever take a serious look at Tom's upbringing and say, "Hey--that didn't work out so well. Maybe we should do something to protect magical orphans." Dumbledore clearly learned nothing (or perhaps he learned the wrong lessons) from the debacle he witnessed. While fanon is full of great ideas, canon is silent on the matter, and seems to imply that Tom is *sui generis*, and that nothing needs to be done institutionally.

Chapter 18

"You might as well have put a notice in the Daily Prophet, Albus," Snape remarked acidly. "Philosopher's Stone on display at Hogwarts: Dark Lords wanted, no appointment necessary."

Dumbledore moved his sherbet lemon around in his mouth, eyes raised in bliss. "The Stone is perfectly safe."

"Perhaps it is," Snape replied stiffly. "The students, however, are not. Why in the world would you keep such an object in a school full of children? How can it be safer there than in Gringotts?"

"Actually," Dumbledore said, with that I-know-far-more-than-you look that Snape detested, "there was a break-in at Gringotts this very afternoon. Very fortunately, the vault in question had been emptied just an hour before. Lucky, that."

"If you hadn't sent Hagrid to Diagon Alley, where he regaled the regulars at the Leaky Cauldron with tales of his' important Hogwarts business,'" Snape pointed out, "no one would have even known it was there." After a moment, he asked, "I suppose the culprit was not apprehended at the scene?"

Dumbledore's sphinx-like smile told Snape everything he needed to know. The potions master rose and stared into the fire, trying to calm himself. He growled, "Very well, the bait is offered. You believe something will come of it."

"I know it will. Now is the time, Severus. We can stop him before anyone else even knows he's back."

"The boy is somehow involved in your scheme."

"You disapprove, but it is his destiny." More gravely, Dumbledore added, "If all goes well, Harry will profit the most."

"As he profited from his upbringing with the Dursleys?"

"I didn't know about the cupboard, Severus. I am very sorry. However, Minerva tells me that the two of you have arranged Harry's new quarters most charmingly and that he is delighted with them. I think it splendid that his first experiences with magic are so benign--so positive. He is well on his way to learning to love magic and our magical world. His relatives will exert no counterinfluence."

Snape's forehead ached with the intensity of his frown. "Was that your purpose? To assure that the boy felt there was no other option but the wizarding world?"

Dumbledore gazed back at him without apology. "Harry is very important, Severus. We lose so many of our muggleborn--so many of our muggle-raised, too. Our little world is sometimes too narrow for them. They have family and friends they cannot abandon--they have interests and pastimes we cannot offer. It may seem cruel--" He winced, and then nodded. "Yes, it was cruel. A cruel necessity, I swear to you. We cannot lose Harry. His fate and Voldemort's are inseparably enmeshed."

Snape slapped his hand against the unyielding stone of the wall. "He has already lost his parents, his fortune, and his home! Will you not be satisfied until you have his life as well?"

"Your concern does you credit, Severus. If all goes well--and I am relying on you to see that it does--he will be safe. I have given great thought to the matter, and I believe the plan I've devised will contain Voldemort without necessitating--" He paused. "Well, enough of that. Tell me of your day. I can only imagine how overjoyed Hagrid was to see him after so long."

Irritated at the change of subject, and even more at Dumbledore's evasiveness, Snape decided to be difficult. "Oh, certainly. He nearly smothered the boy. Perhaps Poppy should examine him for cracked ribs. Harry seemed glad to meet another admirer, though of course Hagrid was hardly the first. The Longbottom boy literally ran into him at the bootmaker's."

Dumbledore's eyes brightened. "Ah! Young Neville! How was he? Did he and Harry seem to get on?"

"As to your first: he's a timid, harried creature, entirely crushed under the weight of family expecta--no, make that lack of expectations. I overheard Longbottom telling Harry that his family thought him a squib, and that he had never spoken to another boy before. How is he to cope at Hogwarts?" Before Dumbledore could utter the unwanted, smiling reassurance, Snape hurried on. "And did they get on? Harry certainly seemed to wish to protect him from his family, but I cannot say if they will be friends. Neither of them has much experience in making them," he added, with a faint sneer in the Headmaster's direction. "However, Harry did get on rather well with Draco Malfoy. They met at Flourish and Blotts. Narcissa was so insistent that we join them for lunch. Harry had never been to such a place as Summerisle's and seemed to like it very much."

A look of disappointment. "Was that wise, Severus? You would expose Harry to their influence?"

By now thoroughly roused, Snape threw himself into the chair opposite Dumbledore and glared at him. "You seem to think that Harry is some sort of tabula rasa, some empty vessel waiting to be filled. He may be your only concern, but I have others as well. You are worried about Draco's influence on Harry. Well, I'm not. Harry recognized instantly that Draco is absurdly full of himself--'as spoiled as Dudley,' were his exact words, though he added, 'but he's not nasty to me.' No, indeed! The influence I saw at lunch was that of Harry on Draco. You may care nothing for my Slytherins, but I do. I saw that Draco wanted Harry to think well of him. I saw Draco refrain from using the word 'mudblood' in Harry's presence. If he can exert that kind of influence, I can only say I wish Harry would be sorted into Slytherin."

He saw Dumbledore about to speak, and gestured for another moment to have his say. "Not that I think he will. He's had to lie and sneak about to survive among the Dursleys, but that's not all there is to Slytherin. Harry so far has no great ambitions. I have told him that I will be pleased with his sorting as long as he is, and I further assured him that his mother would want him to be in the house to which he is best suited. I cannot speak for his father," Snape sneered. "I suspect he would have been as obnoxious on the subject as Madam

Longbottom and her idiot brother. They seemed only too eager to make their own charge feel a failure if he's not a Gryffindor."

"I am sorry to hear that," Dumbledore said mildly. "Augusta was a good mother to Frank, but time and events, it seems, have been perhaps too much for her."

"I hope you are not about to add 'she's not the only one.'" Snape got up and paced restlessly. "To be perfectly candid, Harry was very taken with Narcissa. She pointed out their family relationship. She was kind to him, and he clearly responded to an attractive woman mothering him a little. And she too refrained from the usual pureblood rant. Has it occurred to you how remarkable that is? Simply not saying certain things--understanding that they are not acceptable in certain situations--is a step toward not saying them in any situation."

"Possibly," Dumbledore allowed. "I would never accuse Narcissa of being socially inept, however. But Lucius--"

"--Yes, Lucius could be dangerous. However, I believe he could be neutralised somewhat if Draco regards Harry as a friend. Ultimately, the Malfoys are for the Malfoys. They will do what they must for influence, for money, for power. Harry Potter has tremendous personal prestige. Lucius is perfectly capable of holding his nose and tolerating a halfblood 'Cousin Harry' in order to appropriate a little of that prestige for himself."

"I do understand your views," Dumbledore said patiently. "And furthermore, I agree that the longer Lucius were to tolerate Harry, the harder it would be for him to disassociate himself later. That could be all to the good in the long run--as long as all goes well this year."

"Yes!" Snape paused. "Which brings me to something very alarming. I saved the important item for last."

Dumbledore inclined his head, inviting Snape to continue.

Snape looked at him, eyes hooded in suspicion , and abruptly asked, "What's the matter with Quirrell?"

"I don't quite understand you, dear boy."

Snape did not inform Dumbledore that he had long ago twigged to the fact that "dear boy," was Dumbledore's "tell:" the proof positive that he was evading or obfuscating or outright lying. It was too useful to give away. He simply said, "The stammer? He never had one before."

"I believe his experiences in the Balkans were stressful."

"The purple turban?"

"An amusing souvenir."

"The pervasive odor of garlic?"

"A lingering dread of vampires."

Snape drilled Dumbledore with a gimlet stare. "And what about the fact that not ten seconds after meeting him, Harry screamed with pain, clutched at his scar, and fainted?"

"Oh, dear."

Somewhat later, Snape made his way down to his own quarters, thoroughly perturbed. Quirrell was clearly the Dark Lord's agent--though Albus hinted at something worse. It was intolerable that he was allowed into Hogwarts. It was intolerable that he was permitted to be a teacher. It was intolerable that such a man should be Harry's first instructor in Defense against the Dark Arts.

What had happened to Quirrell? He was a bright fellow, and might not have been an entirely hopeless choice for the Defense position, had things been otherwise. Snape recalled the scholarly, earnest, rather pleasant young man who had left Hogwarts last year for foreign parts. They had been distantly cordial, and had even played chess on occasion. The night before his departure, he had sat in Snape's quarters, drinking his whisky, talking about his longing for adventure. Unfortunately, it seemed he had had one.

Well, no more whisky for him, Snape decided.

A letter, folded and sealed, lay on his writing desk, where he told the elves to put everything that came to him by owl. Snape examined it cautiously before breaking the seal.

My dear Severus--

A letter from Lucius Malfoy, in that wizard's bold and elegant hand.

Narcissa is sitting beside me as I write, still waxing lyrical about your "delightful" charge. I congratulate you, my good friend, on such a coup! Wizarding proxy for Harry Potter! Quite ingenious. I bow before your resourcefulness, in using such an obscure statute to obtain the de facto guardianship of the celebrated hero of our world.

Draco, too, was very pleased with young Potter, mentioning his pleasant demeanour, unexceptionable appearance, and love of pudding equal to Draco's own. His only fault, it appears, is his lamentable ignorance of the glories of quidditch. Narcissa, on the other hand, is concerned that he is perhaps a bit "delicate," and in need of a woman's touch. I translate that as a desire to cram him full of sweets. A harmless enough ambition, surely.

In short, they feel that nothing will do but to invite the estimable Mr Harry Potter to Malfoy Manor. And he must come today, or at the very least, tomorrow!

Realising that this might be somewhat unreasonable, I request the honour of your presence, and that of your ward, on Friday. As Draco wishes for him to be given a flying lesson, perhaps it would be best if you come around three. The boys can enjoy themselves in the garden, have a short flight, an alfresco tea, and then have some time to become better acquainted before dinner at--let us say seven o'clock, in deference to Mr Potter's youth.

Does the day suit? Do let me know, as my loving family will give me no peace until everything is settled. And I confess myself curious about this boy, this very remarkable boy, this Boy-Who-Lived.

L

Snape blew out a breath and slumped in his chair, feeling as though another weight had been piled on his shoulders. Lucius, too? Well, it was no more than he had expected. He had expected it, in fact, from the moment Narcissa had set her violet-blue eyes on Harry in Diagon Alley. Everything was moving a little faster than he had hoped, especially with the ominous addition of the Quirrell enigma.

It would be foolish to offend Lucius by begging off with feeble excuses. The boys got on well enough. Dinner at Malfoy Manor was always worthwhile, now that Abraxas Malfoy was confined to his chambers. That was a mystery in itself, though Snape had no desire to question Lucius about his father's "illness." Abraxas Malfoy had become very odd in the past few years, so odd that his behavior in public could no longer be hushed up or excused by great wealth. Lucius had seized control of the family interests and had locked the old man up behind wards rivaling those of Gringotts. A good thing, too, in Snapes opinion. Abraxas had never failed to insult Snape every time they met.

Let him rot, the rude old bugger.

Besides, he might get a look-in at the library, and that rare volume of Paracelsus...

He found a clean sheet of parchment and scratched a brief acceptance.

Lucius--

Friday at three is quite convenient. Thank you for the invitation. Mr Potter is partial to treacle tart.

S

He smirked. Not the sort of intelligence Lucius was looking for, he supposed. It would do Lucius good to have to wait for what he wanted, for a change. He must warn Harry to be careful about giving too much information, without making the boy anxious and uncomfortable.

He was distracted from his thoughts by a green face in his fireplace. It was Minerva.

"Severus? Are you back?"

"As you see."

"May I come through? I have something for you."

He waved at her impatiently, not in the mood for company, but resigned to it. Besides, it might do him good to vent, and Minerva was not too pleased with Albus herself at the moment.

She bustled in, smiling, her hands full of what appeared to be papers.

"When I went through my old photographs, I found a picture of the Potters' wedding, and one taken just before they went into hiding. I made copies. I thought Harry could add them to his album."

He gestured her into the chair beside him and dutifully took the first picture.

There they were, the Holy Trinity from the odious statue. Potter, thankfully, had eyes only for the baby in Lily's arms, and Snape could ignore him. Harry was a pink little thing, apparently sound asleep. Lily, serenely happy, looked out at Snape and gave him a gentle smile.

He sighed. It was a painful reminder of the last time he had seen Lily in life. The Potters had been in Diagon Alley, only a day or two before they disappeared into the dubious safety of Dumbledore's cottage. Lily was holding her child, who was all but concealed by a fluffy red blanket, save for a tuft of dark hair. Lily was wearing a brown cloak lined with lavender silk. Locks of flaming hair whipped in the wind. She had not seen Snape, skulking in the shadows. The baby mewed, and Lily looked down at him, her face filled with unbearable tenderness...

Minerva shoved another picture at him. "And this, too. I'm sure hell be glad to have it."

Lily and James on their wedding day. Snape scowled at James Potter, the smug bridegroom, and forced himself to say, "Yes. The two pictures will round out his family history quite well."

With suspicious mildness, she handed him a third, larger picture. "And this is for you."

It was a full-length photograph of Lily alone, dressed in her full wedding regalia. Lily was quite beautiful in the picture, glowing with happiness. Her wedding robes veiled her slender body like wisps of scudding cloud in high summer. Her jewels sparkled no more brightly than her eyes. She was fair and queenly to behold, and no witch in the world was her equal.

He stared at it for some time, deciding where to take it to be fittingly framed.

"Thank you," he finally managed.

"You're very welcome. I'm sure she would like you to have it. I'm very proud of you, Severus. Very proud of how you've put the past behind you and taken charge of Harry."

He shook his head. "I can never put it behind me. Don't you see? It's all because of the past. I know you all think I've been childish, holding on to my grudge against Potter, but Harry is not his father."

"Childish? No. Though sometimes..." She looked away, lost in thought. "Sometimes one must be a parent, in order to leave off being a child." More briskly, she said, "'Nonetheless--it was a lucky day when you spotted that address and dealt with that dreadful situation. I shudder to think what problems Harry would have had at school if you hadn't!"

Carefully setting the picture aside, Snape sat back to throw his bombshell at Minerva. "He'll still have his share of problems, thanks to Albus!" Briefly, he told her of the meeting with Quirrell and Harry's startling reaction.

Minerva seemed very grieved. "I can't believe it! Quirinius was always so sensible--so--"

"Decent? Well, whatever he was, he isn't anymore. I'll keep my eye on him. And of course Hagrid piqued his interest. Harry and I saw Quirrell following him to Gringotts. He certainly must have guessed that Hagrid was either depositing or removing the Stone. Albus says that the vault was broken into later today, so he knows it was removed. As it was, in Hagrid's words, 'important Hogwarts business,' he knows where it is now."

"Stealing it for himself would be shocking enough," Minerva considered. "But for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? It's horrible. I can't understand Albus at all these days. He says he has a plan, but he won't tell me specifics. He's hinted, though, that he wants me to design some sort of magical challenge as a protection. I daresay he'll ask you the same."

"But why? Why not simply ward the Stone impenetrably? Why not hide the wretched thing? Why borrow it from Flamel at all? I tell you Minerva, this is some scheme to lure the Dark Lord out of hiding. Albus wants him out of Albania or Outer Mongolia or wherever what's left of him has been lurking. He wants him to come to Hogwarts. And he wants him to come to Hogwarts at the same time Harry Potter is here."

A.N. There will be no slash in this story. There will never be slash in this story. In fact, no ships of any tonnage will set sail in this story, since I hope to deal with the Dark Lord before Harry confronts the greater challenge of puberty. Harry Potter marries a brilliant and exotic beauty when he's thirty-three. That's young enough. If witches and wizards live so much longer, surely there's no bloody hurry. He did not go to school with his wife, and she does not resemble his mother, because that would be creepy. Besides, there's no reason he shouldn't have a bit of fun and see the world before settling down to life as a worker bee. Nor do I like the idea of Hermione rushed into marriage too early.

Jodel, who has given me a great deal of good advice and encouragement about this story, holds that Abraxas Malfoy died in

Draco's second year at Hogwarts, and that may be the reason why Draco did not go home for Christmas (unpleasant upheaval as the old man was dying). However, Lucius, as we see him at the beginning of that year, appears very much in charge. I am postulating that Abraxas was disabled in his last years, and Lucius had assumed control of the family before his father's death. Draco always boasts of his father, not his grandfather. Abraxas was the Malfoy who joined the family's fortunes to those of Voldemort's. You might make the case that Lucius was in a similar situation to that of Draco, having been brought up to follow the Dark Lord. Not an excuse, of course, but a reason.

Harold Ancell has put together a very useful spreadsheet of Harry's child benefits, showing rates over time and cumulative values. The Dursleys did quite well from Harry's residence with them. Then there are also the Guardian Allowance monies and the tax breaks from having another dependent in the house. If you are interested in his findings, let me know and I will forward them to you. I am still working on adding material to my website, and expect that to be up with a link at the end of the week. I will attempt to post the spreadsheet there.

07/02/09 Please go to my author's page for the link. I've revised the look of some of my fanfiction and posted some illustrations for my stories.

Chapter 19

Wind ruffling his hair, Harry pumped harder at the bike pedals, leaning into the turn at Magnolia Crescent. A trio of boys lounged at the corner, heads lowered in bull-like aggression, grunting menacingly at the pedestrians foolish enough not to cross the street to avoid them.

"Oi! Big D! It's the freak!"

Harry glanced quickly to the side. Dudley and his fellow thugs were staring at Harry as he whipped by, winged Mercury on his glorious red bicycle. Trusting to his speed, Harry gave them a cocky little wave and surged past.

Offended, Piers lurched at the red blur, but Dudley caught him painfully by the bicep.

"Leave it, Piers."

"But it's the freak, mate!"

"Leave it!"

Oblivious to the scene on the corner, Harry was home and safe, jumping off the little black seat and running his faithful steed into the security of his private door off the back garden of Number Four Privet Drive. The bicycle just fit between the wainscoting and the graceful helical curve of the metal staircase. Pale yellow light diffused down from a new Finn's Window drawn into existence only that week. Harry dashed up the stairs, shrugged off his battered old backpack, and sprawled contentedly on his very own bed.

It was good to have a few quid of his own to spend as he liked. It was good to ride far and fast through Little Whinging, caring nothing for the censorious looks of gossipy housewives or the threats of Dudley's friends. He had bought himself a lemon ice pop and a new Spiderman comic. Groping into the discarded backpack, he pulled out the new treasure and thumbed through it.

"...WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY..."

"Blimey!" Harry muttered. "Spiderman is really deep!"

Much impressed, Harry wriggled into a more comfortable position and settled down for a good read. He had until noon, when Muffy would serve lunch. Then he'd need to shower and change. Professor Snape was coming to take him to Malfoy Manor to spend the afternoon and evening. Dinner would be a posh affair, Harry had been told that he would be expected to wear the fancy green robes that Muffy had brought early this morning. The robes had real gold buttons, borrowed for the occasion from some of his father James' old clothes.

He was a little nervous about the visit. Madam Malfoy was nice, and Draco was all right, but Harry could tell that the Professor was a little worried about Harry meeting Mr Malfoy.

Mr Malfoy, it seemed, was a very rich man, and a very influential wizard. He was very traditional, too, and thought family was really important. He was one of those wizards who was prejudiced about muggleborn wizards and witches, The Professor said that Mr Malfoy had gotten mixed up with that rotten Voldemort, but that he not been punished for it, since he had claimed that he had been under a spell. The Professor had told Harry that there really was such a spell, called the Imperius curse, which could make people do whatever they were told to do. It was one of the Unforgivable Curses, because it was evil to make another person into a puppet like that. Harry could only agree.

But why should he worry? If Voldemort had done something so awful to Mr Malfoy, then Mr Malfoy couldn't possibly like Voldemort anymore, could he?

No way. Harry shrugged, and gazed entranced at the pictures of Spiderman swinging through the skies. Draco was going to show him how to fly on a broom today!

"Hello, Arabella."

"Severus Snape!"

The woman gaped at her visitor, while cats by the baker's dozen wound sinuously around the humans' ankles. Snape glared out of the corner of his eye at one particularly impudent tom, who thought black broadcloth just the place to deposit white fur.

Snatching his robes away with an annoyed hiss, Snape fixed his stare on the uneasy squib in the doorway. The house reeked of boiled cabbage and catboxes uncounted, but Snape did not allow his nostrils so much as a quiver. He would display no weakness when questioning this woman.

"May I come in?"

With obvious reluctance, he was ushered into the fussy sitting room. It was a shabbier, mustier version of the Dursleys', with the addition of too many cats for cleanliness. He regarded the offered armchair with distaste before vanishing the cat hair on it. He sat, and studied the nervous woman fidgeting on the edge of the sofa. A neat-eared tabby crouched by his left leg, eyeing Snape for lap potential. Snape glared at the creature repressively, until it rolled to its side and washed a white paw, pretending indifference.

He began, not troubling to mince words. "Dumbledore placed you here, I presume, to keep an eye on Harry."

She nodded, and gulped.

"Well, you've done a piss-poor job of it!"

She trembled, mouth working. Snape sneered at her.

"You must have seen what they were doing to him. You must have heard the vicious rubbish Petunia spread about him. He was here in your house, after all! You knew he was underfed and downtrodden. Why the bloody hell didn't you tell someone?" He shouted out the last words, spit spraying. The tabby lying at his feet decided that the kitchen was a more appropriate place for her ablutions.

Mrs Figg seemed about to burst. Her hands waggled futilely, Suddenly she squeaked out, "I did! I did tell Albus! As soon as Harry was able to toddle out of doors they had him pulling weeds in the garden, and they'd speak to him--oh, ever so hatefully! I've told Albus they are mean, miserable people. He doesn't want to hear it. You know how he is--he explains things so I'm not sure that I've seen what I've seen. I feel reassured, and then it all happens again. I tried, but--" her voice dropped, and she looked at her hands, wringing them together until the knuckles showed white. She peered beseechingly up at Snape. "You know how he is. I'm afraid to tell him things he doesn't like. He might put someone else here-- and I do some good. Harry comes here when the Dursleys don't want him, and so he's safe for awhile..."

Snape frowned, beginning to understand. "You do not own this house, I take it?"

"Of course not! How could I possibly afford something like this? Dumbledore made the arrangements and installed me here to keep a watch on Harry, and I've been here ever since." Rather pitifully, she added, "It's the nicest home I've ever had."

Snape was silent, considering her words. No doubt, as a squib she had been given few opportunities in life for education or employment. Dumbledore taking her under his wing must have been the luckiest thing that ever befell her. The house--he snorted to himself--was probably paid for with Potter funds. Ironical, really. And a seriously poor judgement call on the Headmaster's part, giving the otherwise well-meaning Arabella a strong financial incentive not to push too hard to have Harry removed from the Dursleys' care.

"It's all moot now," he said at last. "Minerva and I have taken steps to remedy Harry's situation. You need not worry about him. Continue to keep an eye on the house, though I suggest you focus more on strangers in the neighborhood or visitors to the Dursleys than on Harry himself. I have been named Harry's wizarding proxy by Petunia, so I will be dealing with all his school concerns."

"Well--that's good, isn't it?" Arabella ventured timidly.

"I certainly hope so."

"It's--big," Harry declared. He had seen pictures of country houses, but of course had never visited one. Aunt Petunia had refused to sign his permission slip, and so he had missed the class trip to Syon House and Kew Gardens. He still planned to try to bike there someday.

Malfoy Manor was a very grand house indeed. The portkey had taken them just inside some tall iron gates. Up a tree-shaded avenue awaited the Manor proper: an H-shaped Tudor mansion. It looked more like a palace than a house to Harry's inexperienced eyes.

"I think Lucius wanted you to be properly in awe. Ordinarily we'd portkey to the reception hall."

"I'm glad we did it this way," Harry said frankly. "It's really neat. Now I'll know what Draco's house looks like. No wonder he gives himself airs. I'm surprised though," he remarked, as the gravel crunched under their boots. "I would have thought it would look more mysterious and gothic, or wizardly--or something."

"It probably does, underneath all the sixteenth century trappings," Snape told him. "I know that at the core of the building, there's a smallish Norman castle, built over a Saxon motte-and-bailey, built in turn over a Roman villa and a Bronze Age stronghold. The Malfoys might update their looks, but never their attitudes."

Harry laughed. Snape thought the boy looked just as he should in his green robes. His hair seemed longer and straighter, somehow--not more than an inch certainly, but that was enough to tame it a trifle. It was smoothed with the help of a bit of expensive hair-dressing potion. Snape felt faintly uneasy at the sight of the scar. He had carefully avoided touching it. Generally the boy's hair obscured it. Minerva, he knew, had not touched it, or even looked at it carefully, being too polite to stare. Nonetheless, Snape thought the style suited the boy, if only because it was so very unlike his father.

Harry was cheerful, but a bit intimidated by the size and grandeur of Malfoy Manor. Not that he intended to let Draco walk all over him. He would like to be friends with Draco, but he would not be anybody's lackey. He had asked Professor Snape to put a charm his big box of castle blocks so it could be shrunk to pocket size and then enlarged with three taps. Harry wanted to show Draco something of his own. Professor Snape had told him that Draco owned nothing of the sort. Perhaps he would find them interesting.

It was an altogether splendid house. Harry studied it eagerly, taking in the beautiful mullioned windows and the tall hedges framing the building. He wondered which window was Draco's.

A sudden shrill cry nearly startled him out of his dragonhide boots. He jumped and whirled about, tripping on the pebbles. Snape caught him by the shoulder and said, "Not to worry. That's just the peacocks."

"Blimey!" Harry stared. A flock of snowy white birds strutted gravely across their path. The male's splendid tail was spread in a wide white fan. The smaller peahens trailed after him worshipfully. Harry had never seen anything like them, and found the sight one of unearthly beauty. Then the male shrieked hideously again, and Harry winced. "I thought peacocks were more--colourful."

"White peacocks. They're fairly rare. At least this particular breed is. The Malfoys have been raising them for hundreds of years. Something of a family tradition. And they're quite tasty, too."

"They eat them?" Harry asked, rather scandalized. "That's--that's--"

"No different than your own preference for chicken. Though they raise those, too. It's quite a large estate, with a big working farm further to the east. Sheep, dairy cattle--and winged horses."

"Winged horses! Can we go see them?"

"That's up to the Malfoys. It's rather far. Perhaps another time. Or perhaps Lucius is planning it. We'll see."

"Anyway," Harry pursued his original idea, dragging his mind away from the alluring picture of winged horses. "It's normal to eat chicken. Everybody eats chicken. Is it a wizarding thing to eat peacocks?"

"It's a Malfoy thing. But lots of people used to eat them hundreds of years ago, when they could get them. Sometimes the birds are roasted and then their plumage is replaced. Quite a sight. It's served every Christmas here."

"Weird. What do they taste like?"

"Rather like chicken. I presume you understand that one doesn't try to eat the feathers."

"I'm not stupid, you know. I'll bet they don't eat them at all. You're just taking the piss--I mean--the mickey."

Snape's face settled comfortably into a textbook illustration of the word "smirk."

Before them, a pair of magnificent doors swung open slowly, revealing hints of the splendour within. Just inside the doors stood the Malfoy family. Harry swallowed deeply, and then smiled. This was a real adventure: he would see his first wizarding home. It was pretty neat that it would be such an amazing one.

The tall wizard in the middle was obviously Mr Malfoy. No one could mistake him for anything but Draco's father. Harry thought he looked quite a proper wizard, with his long golden hair and silver eyes. His robes were black and grey and obviously of the finest. His pale, handsome face was a polite mask, but Harry sensed that this was a man who could be dangerous. He looked with relief at Madam Malfoy, who was dressed in soft, gauzy robes in misty shades of blue and lilac. She gave Harry a warm and lovely smile that made him smile back happily.

Draco almost ran to Harry, but his father's hand on his shoulder held him firmly in place, maintaining the dignified tableau. The visitors were meant to present themselves to the Malfoys; not the Malfoys to their guests. Nonetheless, they were welcoming, in their own fashion.

"Severus! Harry!" said Narcissa. "We're so glad you could join us today. Lucius dearest, this is my cousin, Harry Potter."

"Harry--Potter," drawled Lucius Malfoy, taking Harry's hand for a brief shake. Harry was fascinated by Mr Malfoy's exquisitely manicured nails. They shone like glass, with perfect white half-moons at the base. Harry had had no idea men could be so--well-groomed. Tearing his eyes away, he looked up into the intent silver gaze. Mr Malfoy had not let go of his hand. With his other he was brushing Harry's black hair to one side, the better to see.

"Your scar is legendary," he was saying, "as is--" he paused, his practiced smile gone.

Snape was on guard, and felt a faint alarm at his old associate's strange expression. Had he touched the scar? Had his own Dark Mark recognised the echo of the Dark Lord? Lucius' eyes had widened slightly. After what was really only a few seconds, he smiled again, and released Harry. He continued, "--as is your victory over the Dark Lord. You are most welcome here. Severus, a pleasure as always."

Harry wondered if Mr Malfoy had meant to say something else. Before he could reply, Draco was talking excitedly. "Father found a broom for you, so we can fly together! And later, were going to go see the Aethonians!"

Forgetting his odd reception, Harry grew excited himself. "The winged horses?"

"Yes! I'm learning to ride them, too! It's very tricky. Father's teaching me."

"I'd love to see them," Harry said. "I'm sure they're gorgeous."

Smoothly, Lucius answered, "They are, actually."

Thawing slightly, their host stepped back, gesturing his guests into the drawing room. Harry admired the sight of his very own dragonhide boots treading the glossy black-and-white floor. Warned by Snape to avoid staring, Harry tried not to turn his head, only letting his eyes flick here and there to take in everything about him.

He had never seen a purple room before. A closer look revealed that the walls were neither papered nor painted, but covered with rich heavy silk. The silk caught the light of a huge crystal chandelier, reflecting it with soft purple gleams. Harry was effortlessly shown to a gilded armchair covered with ivory brocade. The huge fireplace was pure white marble, the mantelpiece supported by a pair of carved mermaids. The boy found himself blushing at the sight of their round white breasts. There were family portraits on the walls, all looking at him and whispering softly, a light susurrations of unintelligible words.

The armchair was too big for him. Harry felt awkward and off-balance with his feet hanging inches from the floor. He had to perch on the edge, because the back was too far away. Draco looked more at ease, lounging beside his mother on a long sofa. The two adult wizards were comfortably enthroned in chairs like Harry's.

"How nice you look, Harry," Narcissa said kindly. "Green is such a good color for you. One would never guess that you learned only recently that you were a wizard."

"Thank you, Madam Malfoy," Harry answered, feeling a bit shy. He fumbled with a gold button. He quite liked these buttons. His Dad had worn them in his day, and they were embossed with the design of a leaping stag. Trying to think of something to say, he blurted out, "I like wearing robes. They feel--right."

"And so they should." Draco declared.

"I'm told you're quite the young scholar," Lucius remarked idly, studying the boy carefully.

"Not much of one really, but I do like reading a lot. I can't wait to start at Hogwarts."

"You are fond of History, I understand?" Lucius looked at him with unnerving intensity. "And--interested in Runes?"

Brightening, Harry nodded. "I think Runes are great! You can do so much with them! You don't even need a wand for a lot of it. It's too bad we have to wait until third year, but I expect I'll have plenty to keep me busy before then."

"Oh, it's never dull at Hogwarts!" laughed Narcissa. She gave Draco a light, one-armed hug. "We'll miss having Draco at home with us, but it's very important to meet other wizards and witches one's own age."

He had been warned not to reveal anything about where he lived, but Harry couldn't help saying, "I wish there were a primary school for witches and wizards. We could get to know each other even earlier,

and if we did accidental magic, the teachers wouldn't get so shirty about it!"

Snape winced a little at the muggle slang, but the Malfoys refrained from commenting on it.

"Muggles," muttered Lucius, with distaste. "What can you expect?"

"How horrid for you," Narcissa sympathised. "Draco was tutored at home, of course, but he had plenty of opportunities to make proper friends, what with his etiquette and dancing lessons."

Harry stared at Draco incredulously, just barely mouthing the words dancing lessons?" at him. Draco gave him a haughty look, refusing to be embarrassed.

Trying to cope with the idea of Draco taking dancing lessons, Harry told them, "I met a boy named Neville Longbottom who said he'd never spoken to a boy his own age before he met me in Diagon Alley. I'll bet he wishes he could have gone to school. Is home-schooling what everybody does?"

He was looking at Narcissa, and so missed the look that Snape and the elder Malfoy exchanged at the name "Longbottom."

"Well," Narcissa said carefully, "sometimes one isn't sure until the Hogwarts letter comes that children really are magical. It would be so cruel to mislead squibs into thinking they were going with their schoolfriends to Hogwarts. Of course," she smiled, "in Draco's case, there was no question at all. Such a comfort, really, when one's child manifests early."

Draco smirked at Harry, preening.

Not quite rolling his eyes, Harry asked, "What did he do? My teacher at muggle school didn't like it at all when I turned her hair blue."

Draco nearly guffawed, and the adults laughed in an amused, tolerant sort of way. Narcissa told Harry, "Draco blasted a house elf right through the window when he was told he had to go to bed. He was

only four years old! It was such a happy occasion for us." Another squeeze for Draco, and the adult Malfoys looked at each other in fond remembrance.

Harry privately thought that it might not have been a happy occasion for the house elf. Before he could say anything of the sort, Madam Malfoy was speaking to Draco.

"Draco darling, why don't you show Harry your room? We'd like to chat a bit with Severus."

"Come on, Harry!" Draco was up and ready to dash away, and then saw his father's stern look. "Excuse us, Father--Mother."

"You are excused," Lucius replied formally.

Harry gave the adults a little respectful nod. "I'd like very much to see his room. Later, then."

He hurried out behind Draco, clutching his charmed box in his pocket, hoping he'd have a chance to show the contents to his young cousin.

As soon as the boys' footsteps faded, Narcissa leaned back against the back of the sofa and smiled at her husband. "You see, my dearest? Severus' charge is a delightful boy. So polite and good-natured."

Lucius gave his old friend a skeptical look. "Imagine my surprise when I heard the identity of your ward. I thought you had called blood-feud on the House of Potter."

"Harry is not his father. How could he be, when he has no memory of him at all? His mother and I were friends in childhood, and her sister felt that she needed help dealing with a magical child."

Lucius rose, and paced to the window. Rather testily, he said, "It's a travesty for any magical child to be forced to herd with muggles!"

Snape nearly burst out laughing at such barefaced hypocrisy. Lucius had always said it was a travesty for the children of purebloods to be

forced to herd with the muggleborn. Tactfully he refrained from pointing that out. Instead he only remarked, "She's his aunt--his closest living relation by far. Where else would he have gone?"

Lucius shrugged, still staring out the window.

Yielding to the desire to needle the other wizard, Snape observed, "After the--event--it would have been most surprising for any of the Dark Lord's former adherents to petition for custody, after all. It would have been even more surprising had it been granted."

Narcissa disliked the direction the conversation was taking. "It might have been nice for Draco to have had a companion, though. Such a sweet child. It seems incredible that he could have defeated a great wizard in his cradle. Have you noticed any signs of unusual power, Severus?"

"He's keen enough, certainly. I'm going to try him out making some simple potions before school starts. I have reason to believe he'll do well at it. And he does have something of an affinity for Runes."

"I daresay!" Lucius snapped, still gazing into the distance.

Snape frowned. "And what does that mean?"

"Yes, dearest," Narcissa seconded, stirring from her cozy corner of the sofa. "What does that mean?"

"You haven't seen?" Lucius asked them, exasperated. "Oh--that's right. Both of you are utter ignoramuses about Runes."

"That's not a nice thing to say, Lucius," Narcissa reproved him.

Snape glared at him. "You are obviously dying to share your superior insight, so out with it!"

Lucius turned to them. "The scar. It doesn't seem--unusual to you? Quite remarkable, in fact?"

That Harry's scar was brimming with Dark Magic was something Snape wished to keep secret as long as possible. Tingling with uneasiness, he prevaricated. "The lightning bolt shape might indicate an elemental capability, I suppose--"

"It's not a lightning bolt, you--" Lucius bit off the insult and flourished his wand. Severus and Narcissa edged back warily, but Lucius was already drawing a rune of fire in the air. A sharp-angled S-like shape glittered before them.

"Sowilo. Otherwise called Sygel, The rune of the Sun, of fortune and glory, of inevitable triumph. The boy bears it on his brow like a victorious banner. Whatever the Dark Lord tried to do to him, the boy turned it to his own advantage. And so he may do to anything his enemies attempt against him."

Snape stiffened. "I really believe that it was his mother who--"

Lucius cut him off. "I've seen what I've seen. He is clearly a Child of Destiny. I shall have to think it over. At length."

Shaking his head, Snape expressed his doubts. "Harry is reading all about runes. He hasn't made that connection."

"Of course, not, Severus," Narcissa told him gently. "After all, he has seen his scar only in the mirror. He might not recognize the symbol if it were backwards."

Lucius snorted, amused in spite of himself. Thoughtfully, he murmured, "Then he doesn't know--yet."

A.N. I want to thank all of my reviewers for their brilliant insights. You've given me some real food for thought. Please check my newly-revised author page for a link to Harold Ancell's spreadsheet. I'm still thinking over aspects of the mail situation and the Flamel connection. The whole Riddle thing, too, brings out some interesting points. Obviously, many of you have already noticed that Tom Riddle, while a gifted student and powerful wizard, is somewhat lacking in--how shall I put it?--common sense and logic. Part of his idiocy I put down to the creation of the horcruxes, which seem to have unhinged him.

Please take a look at BajaB's story Fair Trade to that effect. Very interesting indeed. One issue I am currently wrestling with is the whole Chamber of Secrets thing, and how a not-idiot Tom Riddle would make use of it. Really, setting the basilisk on his schoolmates and nearly getting the school shut down (thus sending him back to his lovely orphanage) was not the best-thought plan. (I'm also enjoying Niger Aquila's Rectifier, in which an AU Tom Riddle, who was straightened out in his schooldays, travels to our universe to join the fight against Voldemort.)

Chapter 20

The boys were panting like puppies by the time they bounded up the stairs and ran down the halls to Draco's room. Harry admired it even to Draco's satisfaction, assuring him that yes, it was larger than his own; yes, he liked the color green; yes, the view of the Malfoy estate was wonderful; and yes, he had his own bathroom just as Draco did, only his was smaller.

It was a very grand room, though Harry still liked his own cozy space better. Draco's wide bed, carved and gilded, looked too big for comfort, and the satin bedding looked unsuited for lounging and sprawling. There were some playthings that Harry did not recognize, and some he did, like a large collection of plush animals kept in an ornate chest. Some of them, like a white winged horse and a piebald dragon, were worn with love and age. Draco informed Harry loftily that the plushies were for "babies. I only keep them about because sometimes young children visit us." Harry nodded gravely. He had often envied Dudley his plushies, but he was too old for them now. A grey wolf caught his eye and caused his heart an unaccountable pang. The chest's lid was shut and the boys looked out the broad, silk-draped windows again.

"That's the quidditch pitch," Draco said, pointing to the east of the rose garden. "Father enlarged it last year when he took over from Grandfather."

"Your grandfather--died--last year?" Harry asked. "I'm sorry."

Draco shook his head briskly. "No, he's not dead. He's just old and went a bit off his head. He has a suite in the other wing of the house. His room is warded and all, so you don't have to worry about him getting out."

"Do we need to be quiet?" Harry asked, lowering his voice. He was familiar with the concept of being very quiet and not bothering people.

"No--I told you--he's on the far side of the house, and he has silencing wards as well. He can't hear us and we can't hear him. The elves will let Father know if there's a problem."

Harry had overheard his classmates talking about things their grandparents had done for them, and had often longed for a kind grandfather or grandmother. It had seemed to him unfair that he should not only be an orphan, but have no grandparents, either. "I'm sorry your grandfather is sick, then."

"That's all right. He was always a bit--well--scary. Things are better now that Father is in charge. Anyway," he said, wanting to talk of other things, "As soon as they're done with their gossiping, we'll go to the pitch and try out the brooms. Flying is the best thing in the world. What have you got there?" he asked, seeing Harry bring out a box and tap it to its full size, using Snape's pre-set spell. The grey cubes rattled and shifted.

"Castle blocks," Harry told him, dumping the box's contents onto Draco's elegant study table. He held up a dark blue turret roof. "See? I wanted to show them to you. You can design all sorts of castles. I found a picture of Hogwarts, and I made a castle that looked like it, but I like to make up my own best." He showed how two wall blocks could fit together, leaving a narrow opening. "In the muggle world, these are called arrow slits, and archers would use them to shoot down on an enemy, but in *The Path of Darkness*, I read about the Siege of Tyre, and how the Tyrian sorcerers sheltered behind them to fire spells down on the army of Alexander the Great. Not that it did them much good."

"I know that story!" Draco chimed in, beginning to feel some interest in this strange assortment of shapes. "The Tyrians were really powerful wizards, and they thought no muggle could ever take their fortress."

"But Alexander the Great was not exactly a muggle," Harry declared. He pulled out a flat foundation and began thinking about what would look good.

"No," Draco agreed, snapping together a wall with high arched windows. "He wasn't exactly a wizard, either, even though his mother was a witch, but he had all sorts of wild talents. He was what Father calls a 'Child of Destiny' Father says that once in a great while very

remarkable individuals appear, and normal wizarding society has to make allowances for them. He says the word 'demigod' fits fairly well, too. The Greeks thought the Tyrian wizards were Dark, and the Tyrians seemed to have thought the same about Alexander's ability to inspire his men. I guess they thought he had a natural gift for a kind of Imperius."

"Yeah, that's what my book said. It's great. I brought these, too." His lead figures of Arthur and his court, shrunk down to castle proportions, were duly displayed. Draco liked them, especially Morgan, whom he thought the best dressed of the lot. He decided that the figure of Guinevere was really Nimue, "a proper witch." He had no trouble accepting Sir Lancelot as worthy of his notice, however.

"All the best Knights of the Round Table had some magical gifts, and Arthur was partly created by magic" He broke off crying, "I know!" and ran to the shelves where his own treasures were on view, coming back with a handful of small, exquisite dragon figurines. "We can build a castle, and the wizards and witches can defend it from the dragons."

"Those are amazing!" Harry admired them, listening to Draco's brief lecture on the different kinds. A Hungarian Horntail lay heavily in his hand, and suddenly fluttered its wings and puffed a brief, tiny flame. Harry nearly dropped it in his shock.

Draco laughed at him. "They're partly animated, so they do that if you hold them for more than a few seconds."

Harry set the little dragon down by the beginnings of their castle. "Maybe these witches and wizards are so powerful that these dragons are their familiars---"

A moment of blank incomprehension, and then Draco was swept up in the glorious idea. Their castle rose quickly, wall to tower to dizzying spire. Some green flats and trees decorated the outer keep. The witches were thoughtfully provided with a windowed solar in the highest tower, so they could enjoy the view. A Norwegian Ridgeback perched precariously above them, keeping watch.

By the time Lucius Malfoy came to fetch them--curious to see how the boys were getting on--a new universe had been invented; new names given to the figures; death-defying adventures imagined. The wizard stopped by his sons door, listening to the conversation.

"--and then Harco flies in on Viridius--"

"Why doesnt he apparate?"

"Apparition hasn't been invented in those days. Besides, it's more impressive to fly on a dragon."

"There is that. And he tells Queen Arachne, 'I have lost my greatest knight, but I do not return empty-handed.' He throws Princess Hydrangea at her feet and says, 'Do with her as you will!'"

"Hard luck on Hydrangea."

"She shouldn't have cursed the Queen's dragon."

"Well, if I were Dark Lord, I'd have done things differently--"

Lucius came into the room, rather alarmed. Hearing Harry Potter calmly discussing the prospects of becoming a Dark Lord made his scalp prickle. An impressive-- if eccentric--model castle stood on Draco's play table. The Potter boy must have brought it with him. Lucius had not seen such a plaything at the shops in Diagon Alley. A muggle toy, then, but not unattractive. It was decorated with brightly painted little people and Draco's dragon collection.

He fixed a smile on his face. "I see the two of you have been enjoying yourselves."

Green eyes flicked to him, and the boy answered politely, "Yes, sir, very much."

"Father!" Draco beamed at him. "Do you like our castle? We built it ourselves with Harry's blocks."

As he was shown how the castle was comprised of a set of cleverly-designed building blocks that snapped together, Lucius studied the Potter boy. He seemed unnervingly normal for one bearing a sigil of power--and for an embryo Dark Lord. Perhaps it had just been a figure of speech...

"And this is the Wizard-King Harco, Dark Lord of the Sith," Draco was telling him. "Usually he's King Arthur, but we wanted to make up something different."

"Harco?" Lucius asked, raising a brow.

"Yes," Draco told him. "'Drarry' sounded ridiculous."

"I see. And the Wizard-King Harco rides a dragon."

"Yes, sir," Harry explained. "And sometimes Viridius carries messages for him, just like an owl. Only being a dragon, it can cause misunderstandings."

"I daresay." Lucius smiled slightly. "If you can tear yourselves away, we were all going out to the pitch. Are you interested in learning to fly, Harry?"

"I can hardly wait!"

Even the walk to the pitch was a pleasure for Harry. They trailed after the adults, trading ideas about other castles they could build, while Harry paused, staring at the undulating hedges that enclosed huge, fragrant rosebushes. The rose garden was in the shape of a five-pointed star. Surrounding it were shrubs trimmed into the likenesses of exotic animals. Harry recognized a unicorn and a sphinx, but many of the creatures were unknown to him. He wished that Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them had more and better illustrations. The thing with the head of an eagle and the body of a horse was what his book had called a hippogriff. The looming dark shapes made him uneasy. As he walked past, he felt as though they were watching him. Overhearing the adults talking, he caught at the word "topiary."

He repeated it to himself. Draco heard him.

"Yes, everyone is impressed by the topiary animals. We have the largest topiary garden in England. I like that one best," he said, pointing at a menacing snake-like shape rearing up behind them. Harry looked in that direction and did a double take. The shrubbery was trimmed cunningly to suggest a plumed head. And with the huge size--

"A Basilisk," he shivered. "I guess this version is better than the real thing."

"I daresay," Draco shrugged. "As an old Slytherin family, we would be remiss without paying homage to the King of Serpents."

The adults were laughing quietly at something. Harry had missed it, and hoped they were not laughing at him. The path widened, and passed along a flat-roofed building, elegant with pillared arches and wide windows.

"That's the Orangerie," Draco told him. "We have parties there sometimes. Its very nice in summer, especially. The regular greenhouses are further to the east. Look! You can see the end of the pitch!"

The boys walked a little faster, and caught each other's eye, wishing they could tell the adults to get a move on. Said adults were dawdling unconscionably, chatting and smiling, not understanding the urgency of the situation. The boys were nearly treading on their heels, bursting with impatience. Narcissa noticed them, and kindly moved aside to let the boys run ahead.

"There's the broom shed! Come on, Harry!"

The brass-bound door was flung open, and Harry followed Draco into a sturdy stone structure that seemed too solid and spacious for the word "shed." Motes of dust danced in the light from long, narrow windows. Chests and wardrobes were scattered through the room. A rustic oak table occupied the center of the room, with benches on

either side. A large fireplace, ancient in design and black with soot, was the room's principal feature.

"It's a nice place to sit and warm up in chilly weather. Sometimes, one doesn't want to wait to walk all the way back to the house." Draco was standing in front of a cupboard, prying at the latch. Hissing in annoyance, he gave up, and glanced around for his father. "The really good brooms are in here."

"So they are," drawled his father, entering the shed, "but for today, these will do." He opened a weathered chest of pale, carved wood, and pulled out one, two, three brooms. Looking up, he asked, "Are you sure you wont join us, Severus?"

"I really don't--" Snape began sourly, before catching the look of immense disappointment on Harry's face. "--wish to spoil your idle pastimes, Lucius. If I must, I must." He accepted Lucius sly smile and a fourth broom with ill grace.

Harry followed the others out of the shed, stumbling over the threshold as he examined this new wonder. He hoped he wouldn't make an utter fool of himself. They didn't look much like any brooms of Harry's previous acquaintance. Sleek, swept-back, and polished like fine furniture, these looked like they could fly by themselves.

Madam Malfoy was settled into a luxurious lawn chair, complete with cushions, flowered shawl, and a little table at her side, where a stemmed crystal goblet held something pale and cool. She smiled and waggled her long, bejeweled fingers at them, plainly thinking that she had made the better choice.

"Doesn't your mother fly?"

Draco lowered his voice, "She thinks it's silly. She teases Father about it all the time when she thinks I can't hear. She calls quidditch players 'overaged schoolboys with delusions of godhood.' It's sour grapes, I daresay. My friend Pansy's mother told her that before they were married, Father took Mother flying and she sicked up all over him."

Harry grimaced. "How romantic."

"I think it's awfully decent of him not to mention it when she's on one of her anti-quidditch rants."

"He must like her very much."

A shrug. "Of course."

The pitch was a huge open space, with three hoops of varying heights mounted perpendicular to the ground at either end. They looked like the things children used to blow bubbles, though Harry refrained from saying so. He had read a bit about quidditch in his father's dog-eared book, and knew something about quaffles and snitches. It would be nice to see the real thing, but for today, he would be satisfied with simply getting off the ground.

"Now, you two! Over here!" Mr Malfoy ordered. "Lay your brooms on the ground."

Hesitantly, Harry obeyed, looking quizzically at Professor Snape. He was rewarded with a smirk and a raised brow.

"I have done this before, Father," Draco whined.

"Harry, however, has not," Lucius reproved him. "It won't hurt for you to review the basics. You'll all start this way at Hogwarts, and I want your first flying lesson to go well." He looked around at Harry, who was waiting by his broom. "All right. Now put your hand over it and say 'Up!'"

"Up!" Draco commanded, rolling his eyes.

"Up!" Harry echoed.

To everyone's surprise, the double sound of broom handles smacking into small hands sounded nearly as one. Draco smirked at his own success, and then called out, "Look, Father! Harry did it, too!"

Lucius paused to take a closer look at the smiling dark-haired boy. "So he has. Well done."

"I did it my first time, too," Draco boasted to Harry. "I expect you'll be a very good flyer like me."

"Very well done, indeed," Snape offered his quieter praise to Harry. "Not many succeed so quickly." I certainly didn't, he remembered sourly. I can only hope the boy won't become a quidditch hooligan like his father!

Lucius gave the two boys another considering look, and said, "Next, grip the broom in both hands and swing a leg over. And don't go haring off, Draco!" he added.

There followed a brief inspection, in which Harry was taught how not to slide off the end of his broom. His hands were arranged in the proper position. Then, Mr. Malfoy went over to Draco, and with a stern look, adjusted his son's grip, muttering, "I've told you about this! If Hooch is worth anything at all, she won't let you get away with it. Now remember!"

Draco nearly heaved a great sigh, but seeing his father's expression, stopped instantly.

Satisfied with their preparation, Lucius stepped back. "Now, push off from the ground firmly, then hover. Next, gently, tilt your handle toward the ground and descend again. Go!"

Harry thought that magic had ceased to surprise him. The following few seconds taught him how wrong he was. He was up in the air, moving slowly, looking down at the ground. He found that he could make the broom stop and go, merely with small changes in his posture. It was amazing. It was even better than his red bicycle. Seeing them all watching him, he dipped his broomstick to the ground, and drifted down lazily. Draco was dismounted and leaning on his broom, so Harry followed suit.

He could hardly hear Mr Malfoy's measured approval, or Draco's excited remarks. His head was spinning with joy. He could fly! With a

broom, he could go--anywhere! He could soar with the birds, visit mountain peaks, cross the English Channel. It was the greatest experience of his life. He stared at the broomstick, eyes huge, blood pumping in his ears.

"Harry!"

"Sir?" Harry looked up to see Snape looming over him, smirking.

"We were waiting to see if you wanted to fly around the gardens."

"Oh, yes! Sorry!"

Everyone was waiting for him. Mr Malfoy had drawn on some smooth black leather gloves. Harry remembered vaguely that some expert flyers always wore them. He forced the goofy grin off his face, and tried to pay attention to his host.

"I'll lead. Draco, you're next, and Harry--follow Draco. Don't press too close behind him. Try to keep two broom lengths between the two of you at all times. Severus, you go last and keep an eye on the boys." With easy grace, he was on his broom and up in the air, curving smoothly toward a maze of hedges. Instantly Draco was after him, fumbling with his grip for a moment.

Harry was so flustered that he tripped over his broom. Glad that the Malfoy males had not seen it, he glanced back apologetically at Snape, who gestured him skyward. A push against the ground and he was aloft, leaning forward to catch Draco up, easing back when he was the proper distance. He looked over his shoulder, and was reassured to see Professor Snape following him, a black shape stark against the bright blue sky, robes billowing like storm clouds.

They started out at a mild pace, swaying slightly as they curved around the marble steps leading down to a reflecting pool dotted with waterlilies. Harry glanced down and saw a shimmering likeness of himself briefly flash past. A green fragrance filled the air, and they were over the herb garden, looking straight down at an ancient sundial, green with age, guarded by spears of larkspur. Picking up speed, they twisted over an intricate knot garden, and then were back

among the topiaries. Draco looked back and grinned at him. Harry grinned back and dared to put out a hand, fingers brushing the basilisk's plume. Below, a white peacock shrieked in alarm.

"Hands on the broom, Potter!" called Snape.

Harry nodded, and obediently resumed the grip Mr Malfoy had shown him.

But Lucius had no such reservations himself. He dropped suddenly over a field of wildflowers, and plucked a handful of rose madders and purple loosestrife, blue cornflowers, and snowy meadowsweet. Draco dove after him and managed a rather bedraggled bunch of yellow goatsbeard. Harry gulped and followed, yanking up a tall pink cosmos, roots and all. Embarrassed, he thumped the plant against the broom handle, shaking off clumps of dirt.

"Now--this is a test of accuracy!" shouted Lucius. He led them faster now, back toward the pitch. Harry wondered how he would throw his ungainly stalk of flowers through a hoop. Instead, they went up, up, and then quickly down, down, toward the silken, cushioned comfort of Narcissa Malfoy. Harry wondered what was coming next.

Draco glanced back and shouted, "Come on, Harry! My mother likes flowers!"

Faintly, Harry heard Snape protest, "I think this is a really bad id--"

The air pressed against Harry's ears and they swooped low over their resigned target. Lucius was only two yards away when he threw his missile. A rustic bouquet exploded over Narcissa, and she managed a game smile, brushing petals out of her hair. Lucius pulled up and Draco dove in, not nearly as close. Yellow blossoms bounced around her. She flinched as one splashed into her wineglass, and another fell down into the front of her robes. Then Draco was gone, leaving Harry to follow.

"Sorry, Madam Malfoy!" he shouted, and rather gently threw the cosmos plant her way. She caught it and waved, still fumbling with her neckline, and Harry pulled up so sharply he nearly did a roll.

Straightening, he flew after Draco. Professor Snape called something down to the hapless victim, and she called something back, but Harry was already too far away to hear. At least she didn't sound angry.

One, two, three, four, they sped away from the pitch and toward the orchard. Ancient apple trees, gnarled and grotesque, seemed to reach out to catch at them. Instead of flying over them, Lucius led them in a twisting path around thick trunks and past knotty branches. In the dappled light, it was harder to see where he was going. Up ahead, boughs swayed and rustled. Lucius had something red and round in his hand. Draco grabbed at a branch and missed, and then grabbed again a little further on. A brief tussle and a parting, and a fan of leaves swung back, brushing the top of Harry's head. And apple? Could he pick one on the fly?

More glad than ever for his new contacts, he focused on the way before him, trying to spot the flashes of red among the dark foliage. Then there was a tempting glimpse of yellow nearby, and Harry snatched at it, feeling a smooth shape in his hand. Yes! An apple: a Golden Delicious. Harry had always liked them--when he could get them.

Very pleased with himself, he flew after Draco, not daring to look behind him to see how the Professor was faring.

I hope were not going to throw these at Madam Malfoy!

Behind Harry, Snape was preceding rather more sedately. He flew to a promising tree, found a decent specimen, and picked it carefully. Polishing it absently on his robes, he flew after Harry, hoping that Lucius would grow bored with his game. It was a decent enough way to teach flying, he supposed, briefly amusing himself by imagining the career of Lucius Malfoy, Hogwarts Flying Instructor.

A pity 'Malfoy's don't work', he thought, remembering Lucius' odious father's contemptuous remarks when he heard Snape's future plans. If Lucius had been allowed a proper career, or if he hadn't been so disgustingly rich, he might never have gotten himself involved with the Dark Lord. And at that, it had been largely Abraxas Malfoy's doing. I wonder if Lucius was ever allowed to think what he might like to do

with his life? It seemed unlikely. In Snape's experience, rich purebloods had their futures mapped out minutely from the day of their birth. Lucius' interest in a quidditch career had been ruthlessly quashed by his father, who had chosen his son's associates, politics--and even his wife. Only if they threw everything over in an act of rebellion, like Sirius Black, could purebloods strike out on their own. And look how Sirius Black had turned out!

Flying conscientiously, Snape let his mind drift to Harry's father. In a way, James Potter had defied convention, too. If Potter's parents had not died untimely and left him master of his fate, would he have dared to marry a muggleborn? Snape rather doubted it. The Potters had the reputation of being pleasant people, and would not have threatened death or disinheritance, but they would have had many means of persuasion at their disposal if they felt their heir was in danger of an unsuitable alliance. Potter had never pursued Lily seriously until after the death of his father. If Guy Potter had been a trifle more careful with that cursed music box...

It was a useless supposition. After all, he himself was hardly living his dream. Never in his youth had he considered teaching. He had liked studying potions, yes, and he and Lily had discussed going away together as apprentices after Hogwarts, but once she had cast him out, he was free to admit that his favorite subject was actually Defense Against the Dark Arts. He had topped it every year without fail. The werewolf had been considered the best of the Gryffindors in the subject, but Snape could say with perfect honesty that Lupin was no real competition.

As a child he, Snape, had seen the red-clad Aurors in Diagon Alley, and he had admired them and wished to emulate them. And yet, somehow once he was actually at Hogwarts, Snape had found himself more and more marginalized and pigeonholed as a future dark wizard. In his sixth year, he came to understand that those in the positions of power, the ones who admitted candidates to Auror training, were the very sort of people whose children and grandchildren despised him and spread ugly rumors about him. A few unfortunate meetings had made it clear that his chances of a Ministry career as an Auror were next to nil. It was a bitter disappointment, but he had had a fallback plan: he would apply to Gringotts as a

cursebreaker. He would have done well at it, he was certain, but all these schemes were flung into chaos by his dunderheaded pledge of allegiance to the Dark Lord, who needed a potions expert and a spy.

Dumbledore--well--Dumbledore had needed exactly the same thing. Snape's panic-stricken confession to the Headmaster had led to years teaching a difficult and subtle art to thick-headed and recalcitrant children. Snape eventually discovered that he did not so much hate teaching, so much as he hated teaching classes. Tutoring a gifted student could be rewarding, but potions class was simply an exercise in crisis management. He was convinced that teaching Defense could not possibly be so nerve-racking. Must his punishment for a mistake made at the age of sixteen be a life sentence?

And yet, here he was, the Potions Master of Hogwarts, chained for life to the position like a galley slave, it sometimes seemed. He understood about the curse on the Defense chair, and mourned it. Indeed, one of the chief reasons that Dumbledore had believed that the Dark Lord was not entirely destroyed was because the curse still lingered. Snape had been somewhat skeptical, but it was true that Hogwarts had not had a Defense instructor last more than one year since the retirement of the famed Professor Merrythought. Snape sneered to himself. Harry's scar was new evidence that something of the Dark Lord still lingered. If he could find a way to exorcise the Dark Magic from Harry's scar, it might well destroy that monster for good and all. Perhaps then Snape would have a chance at the subject closest to his heart. And then--perhaps then--teaching might not be such a burden.

"It must be different, living out here with nobody else for miles."

Draco shrugged, and took another bite of his apple. The boys sat under a chestnut tree, far enough from the adults to have a private conversation. Their own tea was spread before them: sandwiches and slices of treacle tart and a clear carafe of ginger wine, sweating with coolness.

"We have lots of employees, of course. They don't live here. They come and go, taking care of the gardens and the crops and the stock. Back in my great-grandfather's time, there was a whole wizarding village of workers and their families past the Great Barns. Greater Spellcombe, it was called. That was before the Floo network was so widespread, you know. The family grimoire is full of stories of the heirs having adventures with children of the dependents." His voice grew a little wistful. "Sometimes they were quite loyal friends--for people of that sort, you know," he added hurriedly. "My grandfather Abraxas cleared them all out when he inherited. He wanted a bigger park for the flying horses. It all belonged to him, you see, and he had the right to do as he liked."

"It must have been sad, all the same, when all those people were split up and had to go their separate ways."

"I suppose so."

For a few minutes, the silence was broken only by the munching of apples and the wind in the leaves. Now and then, a laugh or a retort floated over to them from the three adults seated in the shade of an arbour.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the horses," Harry told him. "I've never visited a farm before. I'd like to see everything."

"No, you wouldn't!" laughed Draco, tossing his apple core at Harry. "You don't want to see the pigs! Or smell them. Sheep stink too."

Harry tossed his own apple core at Draco. "Yes, I would. It's all really interesting. I got to go to the zoo once, but this is better."

The boys applied themselves to the sandwiches and the ginger wine, eating and drinking in comfortable silence.

After awhile, Draco remarked, "You did quite well at two-on-two quidditch. I hope you're sorted into Slytherin. If we were both on the house team, we'd win the Quidditch Cup for sure."

"I'll end up where I end up."

"In Slytherin you won't have to put up with riff-raff."

"Draco--I am riff-raff--according to some people."

"It's not like you're a mu--mu--muggleborn."

Very seriously, Harry sat forward and blurted out what was on his mind. "Draco, you know I can't listen to anything against muggleborn students. You know I can't. My mother was muggleborn. Do you believe she should never have been allowed at Hogwarts? I would never have been born. She was a great witch, and she gave her life to protect me. I can't listen to anything against her. How would you feel if someone said something nasty about your mother?"

Feeling harassed and out of his depth, Draco snapped, "Leave my mother out of this!"

Reasonably, Harry said, "I'm not saying anything against your mother. I think she's really pretty and really nice. I wish I had such a nice mother. That's not the point. If someone insulted her, you'd stand up to them, wouldn't you?"

"Of course, but--"

"It's just the same. I can't let people criticise my mother. When people sneer at muggleborns, they're sneering at my mother. What do you think should be done with muggleborn wizards and witches? If they don't learn to control their magic at Hogwarts, muggles are sure to find out about us, and then we'd really be in trouble."

"It's not safe," Draco objected. "Who knows who they're telling about magic?"

"There are laws--"

"And even if the muggleborn students follow all the rules, who's to say that their families would? How do we know who they're talking to?"

"Okay. That's a real problem. I don't know much about it, but we should find out. Maybe the families could be charmed so they couldn't tell anyone else."

"Dumbledore would never allow it. The man's such a muggle-lover. Father says he's the worst thing that ever happened to Hogwarts."

"I've never met him, so I don't know. Professor Snape told me about some things that seem pretty odd. You know our History teacher is a ghost? Professor Snape says his classes are really dull and pointless. And I looked at the Muggle Studies book. It's all wrong and out of date."

"Who cares about stupid muggles?"

"Not all muggles are stupid, Draco. Some are really smart, and there are a lot of muggles. And they've got incredibly powerful weapons. They could blow up all of London with just one bomb. What if they found out about us, and dropped a bomb like that on Hogwarts?"

"They do not! I refuse to believe that stupid muggles could blow up all of London."

"If you don't believe me, ask Professor Snape. He knows about atomic bombs. The Americans used them in the Second World War and destroyed a whole city in Japan with just one bomb. And muggles have security cameras hidden everywhere. What if a wizard apparated in front of one? If we don't know what the muggles can do, we can't protect ourselves. I think muggle studies is really important, but the book I saw doesn't have anything important in it." He took a deep breath. "We can't have it both ways, Draco. If the muggles are stupid and weak, we shouldn't have to bother with secrecy. If they're dangerous, we should recognize that and learn all we can about them."

He helped himself to the treacle tart. It was very good.

"I don't see why we should bother with a class, though," Draco complained. "The Ministry must have some muggle experts. Let them keep an eye on the wretched muggles. I wouldn't want to for anything."

I don't hear you going on about how wonderful it is in the muggle world."

Sensing that Draco was hoping for sensational tales of evil muggles, Harry thought about telling him about Dudley and "Harry-hunting." But no--it would make him look pitiful. "There are some nice things, like films."

Then he had to explain what a film was, and tell Draco about James Bond and The Terminator and Star Wars and Indiana Jones. It was tricky, since he hadn't seen much of any of them, but had heard them all repeatedly through the wall of his cupboard. Draco allowed that seeing a play was good fun.

"We always go to the Theatre des Sortilèges when we're in Paris," he bragged. "It's a pity we haven't anything like that in England."

"Why don't we?" Harry asked. "That would be neat. I'll bet a lot of people would like it. If there were a theatre--even a little one--people could put on plays or give talks or play music. It could even be set up to show good muggle films sometimes. I know witches and wizards get together for quidditch games, but it would be nice if there were other things, too."

"There's a batty old wizard named Beery who runs a place in Upper Flagley that he calls the Wizarding Academy of Dramatic Arts, but there's no real theatre." Draco laughed, and suggested. "Maybe that's something you should do with all that Potter money!"

Harry shook his head, not sure why Draco thought he was so rich. "I wouldn't want to wait until I'm of age. It sounds more like a job for your father!" He peered over at the adults. "It looks like they're done with their tea. Couldn't we go see the horses now?"

"Yes! Let's!"

Harry stared at the plate before him with some suspicion. The sorrel soup had been delicious, and the table setting magnificent, but now to eat--

"Peafowl, Harry," Draco told him. "The peahens really taste better. Peacocks can be a bit tough."

Snape cleared his throat discreetly, and Harry glared at him. The plate seemed innocent enough...

Actually, it was very appealing, with the aromatic sauce and the artfully arranged vegetables. He took a wary bite.

"This is fantastic!"

Narcissa smiled at him warmly. Lucius did not smile, but his face relaxed into an expression of benign satisfaction. The light conversation about flying and brooms and horses resumed.

Harry ate happily, content to listen and think about his day, still half in the air in his thoughts. He had to have a broom.

Of course, the Aethonians were magnificent: all glossy chestnut coats and gentle dark eyes and enormous wingspans. Mr Malfoy had been very generous to help him onto the back of one. It was not like a broom at all. Between his legs, he could feel the warmth and aliveness of the creature. Aethonians were spirited and full of independence.

"Philona here is the best-tempered of them," Mr Malfoy had said. "She's not prone to bite or strike out."

"She's the one I'm learning to ride," Draco broke in. "May I show Harry, Father? Please?"

So, too soon, Harry had been eased from the wondrous creatures' back, and Draco took his place. The first powerful downward beat of the mighty wings made him start, but in a moment Draco was aloft for a brief, enchanting display.

"Not too long," Mr Malfoy told him. "She'll be edgy with strangers about." He told Harry, "Perhaps once she comes to know you better, it will be safe for you to try to fly her."

"I hope so, sir," Harry said feelingly. "She's amazing."

Harry dutifully ate his excellent vegetables. Professor Snape was very strict about vegetables. Philona was a lovely creature, but a broom--

Yes, a broom! Flying horses were super, but they were something splendid and out of reach. He could hardly keep Philona in the back garden at Number Four, Privet Drive, after all. He could see it would take a lot of training simply to learn to care for a horse, flying or not. And Hedwig might be jealous of the time and attention a winged horse would demand.

But a broom was easy! Harry had taken to it right away. He could keep his broom down in the storage space with his bicycle, or even in a corner of his room, ready to go at a moment's notice. A broom had no need for food and water and careful training. A bit of polish, and there you are!

He smiled dreamily to himself, picturing Little Whinging far below him as he zoomed at his own free will over England. He'd stow some grub in his backpack, and take off on his own, stopping where he liked, seeing the sights. As soon as he learned how to--what was it?--yes!--Disillusion himself, he was all set. He could go anywhere, and Hedwig could fly along with him!

Imagining his future adventures, he hardly noticed the next course, rousing himself only for the dessert, which Madam Malfoy called Floating Islands. He smiled at her through the radiance of candles and gleaming silver and the glittering refractions of crystal. He smiled at the plate before him, imagining himself rushing through the air, a cloud-capped island far below, set in a wine-dark sea...

"I love magic," he whispered.

N.A. My unkind dismissal of Herbert Beery and the W.A.D.A. is due to the fact that we never hear of it except in passing in Beedle the Bard. In the seven books, no one ever mentions them, which suggests that the theatre school is not a very successful venture. Compare the silence on Beery and the W.A.D.A. to the many references to quidditch and the wizarding wireless in canon. Theatre is expensive, though, and maybe all Beery needs is a large infusion of cash. Certainly the small size of the wizarding world would indicate that theatre is not a viable career for more than a handful of people, at the most. In fact, I suspect that the Wyrdsisters have day jobs. How many gigs could they possibly have in a year? Hogwarts doesn't even have a yearly dance!

A number of you had questions about rune lore. Please check out my author profile for my website fanfiction page. A link there will take you to a page about The Best Revenge. Included on the page there is a link to a runic site that you might enjoy.

And yes, at long last--in the next chapter Harry finally makes it to Hogwarts!

Chapter 21

What a summer! Snape collapsed into his ratty armchair at Spinner's End, glad to have time to himself for once. Harry was as ready as he would ever be to enter Hogwarts. In their last week of freedom, the two of them had hiked in Cornwall, explored the cairns of the Isles, wandered through Kew Gardens, and dined once more with the Malfoys. Snape had seen Terminator II twice, at Harry's demand, wincing at the unbelievable volume of sound and the overwhelming intensity of the images. Muggle special effects had certainly made great strides.

Today they had brewed two potions, the last of a series of six that Snape had thought would give Harry a reasonable background in techniques and ingredients. Since Albus resisted the idea of Harry at Hogwarts before September first, Snape had scrupulously cleaned his own humble home and brewed there. Harry seemed not to notice the shabbiness of Spinner's End, only commenting on the amount of books and how neat it was to have the stairs hidden by a bookcase. They had worked at the battered kitchen table, breaking off for sandwiches they made together. Late in the afternoon, he had taken Harry back to Privet Drive, and had shared the delicious dinner Muffy served. Seeing the boy before him--such a small boy--though he had grown nearly two inches since their first meeting--Snape found it a struggle not to smother the child with last-minute advice.

"I'm going to call on you first thing when you're in Potions, Harry. It's important that your classmates understand that you're a serious student, not just a boy basking in his celebrity."

Harry nodded. "I don't want people to think that I care about being famous. But I don't want them to think I'm the sort of know-it-all who thinks he's better than everybody else, either."

After a few more anxious admonitions, Snape saw Harry struggling not to roll his eyes. He shut his mouth and turned his attention to his crème brulee. It wasn't as if he wouldn't see Harry at Hogwarts, after all.

He would see him tomorrow, in fact: at exactly half-past ten.

-----.

Harry's professors had told him how to walk through the barrier to Platform Nine and Three Quarters. He wheeled his trunk in front of him, preparing to go at the barrier running, and then paused to make his goodbyes.

Aunt Petunia held a dainty lace handkerchief to her eyes. "I can't believe our Harry is going away. You'll be nearly grown by the next time we see you!" If her accent had a curiously Scottish flavour, no one who knew her was there to comment.

Uncle Vernon, expensively tailored, beamed at him, teeth gleaming. Harry stared, and then staggered as he was slapped on the back. His hand was grasped for a fiercely emotional--but manly--shake. He knew this was really Professor Snape, disguised by something called Polyjuice Potion, but the man looked exactly like Uncle Vernon. He heard, unbelieving, as "Uncle Vernon" declared, "You'll make us proud, my boy." Harry took a caged and fluttering Hedwig from him, and stepped back.

"Aunt Petunia"--otherwise known as Professor Minerva McGonagall--bent and kissed his cheek. She smelled of heather, not of Aunt Petunia's usual favorite, L'Air du Temps. It was all completely surreal. Harry wondered if his head would explode. He smiled over his shoulder at them, and caught a glimpse of a large family of redheads coming their way, the mother complaining about "muggles." Knowing that they would be trying to get through, he gave "Aunt Petunia" and "Uncle Vernon" a quick nod, and then started running.

Trundling, really. Holding tight to Hedwig's cage, he picked up speed, clenched his teeth, waited for the crash, and instantly was in bright light, rolling to a startled stop at the sight of a brilliantly scarlet engine.

"Hogwarts Express."

Harry let out the breath he was holding, in a sigh of relief and delight. The engine's smoke drifted in a dense grey haze. A crowd of robed wizards and witches of all ages chattered and jostled, while Hogwarts

students clambered aboard, weighted down with bags and trunks and pets. Owls hooted their complaints, and cats screeched in outrage. Harry stood stock still for a moment, enjoying the amazing scene, and then darted out of the way of the red-haired family following him.

"Harry!"

Draco was waving. Behind him, his elegantly-garbed parents granted Harry their rare smiles. He went to meet them, glad he knew someone in this crowd. "Madam Malfoy--Mr Malfoy. A pleasure to see you. You're looking eager this morning, Draco!"

"We were Disillusioned, and we watched you on the platform," Draco grinned. "We had to see your muggle relatives. What happened to the baby whale?"

"He left for school a week ago. They carried on even more for him--though I suppose that's as it should be--he is their son and all."

"At least they dressed for the occasion," Lucius remarked, rather coolly. "Not as slovenly and trashy as most of the mob. Off you go then. Let's get your things stowed away. It's a long journey to Hogwarts."

"Not without saying our goodbyes first," teased Madam Malfoy. To Harry's surprise, she bent and took his face gently in her soft hands. A kiss was pressed on his brow. "You will never again be on the Hogwarts Express for the first time. Make the most of it."

Harry's hand was given a brief, formal shake by Malfoy Senior, who levitated the luggage onto the train, and led them to a compartment. Once the trunks were secured, he gave the boys a brief, considering look, and then a half-smile. "Owl us after the Sorting. I hope--" he broke off, and simply said, "Enjoy Hogwarts. There's no place like it."

He was gone, leaving Harry and Draco the masters of the compartment.

"Don't you have an animal?" Harry asked.

Draco spread out comfortably on the seat opposite. "No." he drawled loftily. "We have Bubo to relay messages already, and if I need to owl home quickly, there's always the owlery. Perhaps another year I might take a cat. I rather fancy an Abyssinian, but I didn't find one that was just right." He glanced into the passageway, and shouted, "There you are! Get in here, you two! You're late!"

Two large boys lumbered into the compartment and plumped down heavily on either side of Draco. "Harry Potter," Draco said, with a gesture to the boy opposite him. "these lads are Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe. We've known each other forever, and they'll be my companions in Slytherin. Crabbes and Goyles have served the Malfoys for centuries. Greg--Vince--say hello to Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived."

The two boys grunted amiably.

Harry gave them the carefully friendly smile he used with strange dogs. "Vince. Greg. Pleased to meet you."

Goyle turned and remarked to Crabbe, "Thought he'd be taller."

Draco rolled his eyes. Harry continued to smile. It was rather like the zoo.

Crabbe's brow furrowed, and then he blurted out, "What was it like, killing the Dark Lord?"

Draco winced. "Smooth, Crabbe. Very smooth. He was all of--what?--one? I daresay he doesn't remember anything about it. You don't, do you?" Draco asked, trying to hide how very much he wanted to know.

Harry was not fooled. "I do, actually. Bits, anyway." Anger flickered at the rapt expressions. "He giggled in this stupid high laugh like a girl. Then it was all very--green."

Draco's eyes widened.

"And then," Harry said coldly, "his laugh cut off with a squawk. And I'm still here to talk about it. I'd rather not have to again. Is that quite all right?"

"Of course," Draco agreed hurriedly.

A loud whistle, and the train lurched into motion. Harry looked out the window, and saw the Malfoys waving. The boys all waved back, and Draco waved at his parents until they were out of sight. Harry thought the Malfoys looked a little anxious and strained beneath their bland smiles, but he supposed that was normal for parents. He imagined his own parents standing on the platform, his mother's red hair catching the breeze. He sighed. Draco looked a little mournful himself. It occurred to Harry that Draco might have reason to be homesick. To be honest, he was little apprehensive about the coming adventure himself. His wonderful little room seemed very precious at the moment. He would have to find the kitchens as soon as possible and see Muffy. He already missed her.

Seeing Draco discreetly wipe his nose, Harry said, "The trip takes hours and hours. Anyone for a game?"

Goyle's mother had thoughtfully slipped a deck of cards in his pocket, and the four of them were soon playing Exploding Snap, shouting along with every bang. Goyle and Crabbe were not so stolid once their "loyal retainer" façade slipped a bit.

Draco's spirits picked up a bit with the game. He had talked and talked with Father in the past few days, telling him everything that Harry had said and done when they were together: the tone of his voice, the expression on his face, what Draco deduced were Harry's plans. Father had told him very seriously that young Potter was destined for great things, and that it was important to maintain their alliance, no matter where the boy was sorted. Whether or not the Dark Lord ever returned, he had been bested by a child, and Malfoys did not waste their loyalty on losers. Lucius might not be happy with Harry's attitude about blood, but the boy, after all, was young and naïve. And as long as one was flexible enough to accept the occasional outstanding muggleborn--like the boy's mother--it was still possible to keep power in the wizarding world in the proper hands. If

the muggleborn was truly outstanding, and was adaptable enough to integrate fully into the wizarding world, it was not necessarily a disaster. Draco must be proud of his heritage, but always keep his options open.

"It will be awkward if he goes into Gryffindor, I grant you. Nonetheless, don't rise to any baiting from his housemates. Always make yourself the innocent, injured party if anything of the sort happens--and it will. If Potter dislikes bullies as much as it appears, he won't be impressed by that sort of behavior, and he'll hold on to your friendship all the more obstinately. If you don't retaliate, anything they say against Slytherin will seem a lie. And once he thinks they're liars--well--" Lucius smiled slyly, and the smile widened at Draco's answering smirk. "He talks about house unity, you say? Well, that might not be a bad thing, done the right way. If he wants to create a network among the houses, it could be very useful once you are of age. Particularly useful, if he is in another house, and he looks to the Malfoys as his chief allies in Slytherin."

"And Professor Snape, too," Draco reminded his father.

"Yes--Severus." Lucius was silent a moment. "Severus is fond of Harry--the son he never had--though of course there is still plenty of time--"

"I daresay you'll be glad to see Snape when we get to Hogwarts," Draco remarked to Harry.

Harry smiled over his cards. "I only hope people don't think I'm some sort of teacher's pet."

Draco shrugged, "Who cares if the morons are jealous? I hope we're in Potions together. We could be partners."

"Sounds good."

Students were passing, sliding the compartment doors open and closed with hisses and crashes. Trunks thumped against their door, making Harry look up. The red-haired boy Harry had seen in Madam

Malkin's peered in, shouting out, "Oi! Did you hear that Harry Potter's on this train?"

Harry made a face. "No! You don't say so!"

Draco snorted a laugh. "Sounds like a wild rumour to me."

Crabbe and Goyle exchanged a befuddled glance. "But you said he was Harry Potter!" Crabbe objected, jabbing a thick finger in Harry's direction. Draco and Harry burst out laughing. The red-haired boy peered eagerly at Harry, coming further into the compartment. Harry noticed a dirty smear of black on his nose.

"Are you really Harry Potter?" the boy asked.

Harry nodded.

"Oh--well, I thought it might be one of Fred and George's jokes. And have you really got---you know--" He pointed to Harry's forehead.

Harry pulled back his hair to show the scar. All the boys in the compartment stared.

Draco attempted to comfort him. "It's not at all disfiguring, Harry, especially since you wear your hair long."

The red-haired boy was still staring. "So that's where You-Know-Who--"

"Yes," Harry said shortly. "So now you know my name, but I don't know yours."

"No need to ask who he is," Draco sneered. "Red hair, freckles, and the manners of a lout. He must be a Weasley. You'll find that some wizarding families are better than others. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort."

The other boy's ears had reddened, and he clenched his fists in rage. Harry sighed, and put his hand out.

"I'm Harry Potter. I saw you before at Madam Malkin's. You are...?"

The red-haired boy glared at Draco, and fumbled to shake Harry's hand. "Ron Weasley," he muttered. "Yeah, I remember you. You didn't know anything about Quidditch."

"Well, he does now," Draco shot back, rather nettled. "We were playing Exploding Snap just now when you interrupted, so if you would be so good as to remove yourself..."

Ron scowled and slammed out of the compartment.

"Oh, well done, Draco," Harry complained. "Now I have someone pissed off at me already."

"A Weasley isn't worth a second thought," Draco declared. "Your turn to deal, I think."

While they were playing, the train had carried them out of London. Now they were speeding past fields full of cows and sheep. They grew tired of Snap, and chatted for awhile. Harry found out that Greg and Vince's fathers both worked for Mr Malfoy at the estate. Vince, like Draco, was an only child, but Greg had a much younger sister, whom he appeared to regard as something of a pet.

Harry had already been told that the Malfoys raised sheep, but he had not seen them close-to, since Draco found sheep smelly and unappealing. From Vince and Greg, however, Harry learned that the Malfoys raised Greater Spellcombe Sheep, a unique wizarding breed, whose wool was used in making high-quality robes.

"All the Hogwarts robes sold by Madam Malkin and Twilfit and Tattings have at least some Greater Spellcombe wool in them," Draco told Harry. "Mine are pure Greater Spellcombe--the most expensive, of course."

Harry smirked at him, and teased, "Of course! Anything of inferior quality might irritate the delicate Malfoy skin!"

"Stop," Draco grimaced, a trifle embarrassed. "Sometimes you sound just like Snape!"

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered, snuffling like boars.

"Well, he does!" Draco snapped.

They looked out the window for some time, calling out when they saw a white horse--considered propitious by wizarding folk--and speculating about Hogwarts. Crabbe and Goyle's eyes grew heavy, and they dozed off. Draco moved over to Harry's seat and they admired Harry's beautiful traveling chess set. Professor Snape had explained the basics of the game to Harry, but they had played only a few times. Draco, Harry found, was quite a good chess player, and generously shared his insights and expertise with his friend.

Around half past twelve there was a great clattering outside the corridor, and a smiling, dimpled woman slid back their door and asked, "Anything off the cart, dears?"

Crabbe and Goyle were instantly awake, alert, and shoving coins at the woman.

Harry was conscious of the picnic hamper in his bookbag, packed full to bursting by Muffy. "I don't think I really need anything, thank you," he told the smiling witch. "I brought a lunch with me."

"Oh, come on, Harry!" Draco demanded, sorting through the treats. "Try the chocolate frogs, at least. And the cauldron cakes are nice. Nothing wrong with a few sweets. Just beware the Bertie Botts."

Draco's words roused Harry's curiosity. He was informed that "Every Flavour" meant exactly that, and that Draco had never felt the same about them after getting one that--Draco whispered in Harry's ear--"tasted the way dog droppings smell."

Harry laughed insanely, nearly sliding out of his seat. Coughing, he submitted to Draco's urgings and bought a selection of treats, carefully avoiding the dreaded Bertie Botts. He eyed the chocolate frogs doubtfully.

"They're not really frogs, are they?"

"Of course not. They've just a little charm on them to make them jump at first, so hold on. They have cards inside them of famous witches and wizards. I have a complete collection already--over seven hundred."

Harry laughed. "That's a lot of chocolate." He unwrapped the frog and looked at the card. It showed an old man's face. He wore half-moon glasses and had a long, crooked, nose. His flowing silver hair, beard, and mustache put Harry in mind of Father Christmas. Under the picture was a name he knew.

"So this is Dumbledore!" He turned over the card and read:

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

CURRENTLY HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS

There followed a brief description of Dumbledore's achievements and hobbies. Professor Dumbledore had worked on alchemy with Nicholas Flamel, the man in the biography Harry's mom had owned. It was in Harry's trunk, even now, and he had looked through it briefly. It was terribly long, of course, which was to be expected when a wizard was hundreds of years old.

"I feel like something besides sweets," Harry remarked, getting up. "Greg! Maybe you can help me get my bookbag down. I've got a lunch hamper in it. Maybe you'd all like--"

There was a knock at the door of the compartment, and Harry looked up to see Neville Longbottom. The boy was near tears.

"Hullo, Neville." Harry greeted him. "Draco, Vince, Greg--this is Neville Longbottom. It's his first year at Hogwarts, too."

A duet of grunts, and a bored "Charmed," from Draco.

Neville was too upset to take offense at the lack of welcome. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Hello, Harry. Have you seen a toad at all?"

"A toad?" Draco muttered scornfully.

Neville flinched a little at Draco's tone, and told Harry, "I've lost my toad Trevor! He keeps getting away from me!"

Draco looked at Neville very haughtily. "You actually paid money for a toad?"

"Uncle Algy gave him to me, " Neville said defensively, not quite looking at Draco. "I don't think Trevor liked leaving our greenhouses. He was very happy there."

"You have greenhouses?" Harry interrupted, rather interested.

"Of course he does," Draco drawled. "It's the foundation of the Longbottom fortune. There's good money in growing magical plants if you don't mind grubbing in the dirt."

Feeling rather sorry for Neville, Harry paused, not knowing quite what to say. Goyle was up, more interested in the contents of Harry's lunch hamper. "Wait!" Harry cried. "I mean--Greg, get my trunk down, if you can. There's a spell to summon a familiar in an old book of my dad's! Let's try it!" With Goyle's muscular assistance, the dragonhide trunk was eased down and Harry quickly opened it, taking no notice of Draco's favourable appraisal of the trunk itself. He dug down and snatched out the copy of Madcap Magic for Wacky Warlocks. "Here it is!"

Thumbing quickly through the dog-eared pages, he found "So You've Lost Your Last Friend." A notation was scribbled beside it in faded ink: This works all right. He read through it quickly, and said, "You'll have to do it, Neville. He's your toad, after all!"

"I don't know--" Neville quavered.

"Do stop dithering, Longbottom, and show us what you can do," Draco said, settling back for the show.

"Here," Harry said, pointing out the incantation. "You just stick your wand out right out, and then say, 'Ecce, Trevor!' And then swoop your arm back as if gathering him in. And you have to think about how much you want him."

Neville obediently practiced the wand motion--a simple one. He whispered to Harry, "I don't think I can--"

"You want Trevor, don't you? Harry whispered back. "Think as hard as you can about that!"

Neville bit his lip and nodded, and then stuck out his arm, shouting, "Ecce, Trevor!" His arm swooped in a grand gesture.

"Maybe someone should open the door," Draco suggested. "Otherwise, it's likely to splatter all over the--"

Just in time, Harry lunged at the compartment door, sliding it open as a startled toad whizzed through, smacking into Neville's hands. The boy fumbled the catch, and Crabbe and Goyle and Harry amongst them managed to get a grip on Trevor and give him to an ecstatic and incredulous Neville.

"I did it!" he stammered. "I did magic!"

"I should certainly hope so," Draco declared, impressed in spite of himself, but unwilling to make a show of it. Such a fuss for a miserable toad! All the same, it was a neat bit of charms work. "Why don't you put him in your pocket, so he doesn't make another mad dash for freedom?"

With more fumbling, that was accomplished, and Trevor was tucked away safely.

"We were just about to have some lunch," Harry told Neville. "Why don't you join us? I've got heaps of food."

"Muggle food?" Draco challenged. "What have you got?"

Harry only gave him an enigmatic smile, and pulled the oversized hamper from the much smaller bookbag with some difficulty. Harry had reread his battered copy of *The Wind in the Willows* only last week. There was a part he loved best, and he had asked Muffy to make up the hamper just so--with a few additions of his own. Crabbe and Goyle were very nearly drooling at the scents wafting towards them.

"There's cold chicken inside it," Harry replied. He took a breath. "--and--
cold tongue cold ham cold beef pickled gherkin salad french rolls scress and
widge spotted meat ginger beer lemonade soda water--"

The boys were staring at him and his hamper in awe, as the longest word they'd ever heard was put to the proof. Harry just kept on pulling out food.

"--and sausage rolls pork pies bacon pasties strawberries cream cheese--
and some treacle tarts and meringues, if we haven't enough sweets!"

Crabbe and Goyle fell on the food in rapture. Neville smiled in delight, and Draco nodded approvingly, biting into a rich and crumbling pasty. "Not bad, Harry. Not bad at all."

There was no further speech for some time. At length, drowsy and replete, they sprawled in their seats gorged and triumphant, while the countryside through which they passed grew wilder. Now there were woods, twisting rivers, and dark green hills.

The compartment door slid open again. A girl stood framed in it: a girl with lots of bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth. In a bossy voice, she demanded, "Has anyone seen a toad? Neville--oh--there you are. Any luck?"

Neville roused himself to reply proudly, "I found him--with magic."

"Oh, are you doing magic?" asked the girl. "I wish I'd seen it!"

"It was a spell in my dad's book," Harry told her, very pleased with his father. "Madcap Magic for Wacky Warlocks."

"That's not on the Hogwarts list," the girl told him. "Is it any good?"

"Have a look at it if you like," Harry said. "Come in and have some lunch."

She tutted at him, brushing at the seat. "Honestly! Boys! You're all over crumbs!"

"Most excellent crumbs," Draco remarked dreamily.

The girl sat down by Harry and began paging through the book, talking all the time.

"I've tried a few simple spells just for practice and it's all worked for me. Nobody in my family's magic at all. It was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course--"

Draco's eyes widened, and he began inching away, further back into the seat, as far as possible from the strange girl.

Oblivious to his growing horror, the girl prattled on. "I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard. I've learned all our course books by heart, of course. I just hope it will be enough--I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?"

She said all this very fast. Harry gaped at her. He'd had done his share of studying over the past month, but he certainly couldn't claim to have learned all his books by heart.

Luckily, Neville's manners saved the moment. "Neville Longbottom," he said softly, with a small nod, in lieu of a bow to a lady.

"Uhh--" Harry managed brilliantly. "This is Greg Goyle--and Vince Crabbe--and this--" he said, attempting his suavest 'shaken, not stirred' voice, "-- is Malfoy--Draco Malfoy--" He nodded to her, distracting her from Draco's expression. "--and I'm Harry Potter."

"Are you really?" asked Hermione. "I know all about you, of course. I got a few extra books for background reading, and you're in Modern

Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century. Do you have anything that doesn't have meat or refined sugar in it?"

Harry served her some strawberries and cream cheese with deliciously crunchy biscuits. Clearing his throat, he said quietly, "You can't believe everything you read. I read those books, too, and I'm not sure I agree--"

"Have him tell you about the green light!" Draco sniped at the girl. "I daresay you don't know all about him."

"Do you know what house you'd like to be in?" Harry asked desperately, hoping to forestall a fight.

"Oh--Gryffindor, I think," the girl blundered on. "I've been asking around, and I hope I go there. I heard Dumbledore himself was in it, and I think it sounds much the best--"

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Why?"

"Why do you think it sounds the best?"

"Well--Dumbledore is such a great wizard, and if he was in it--"

"You shouldn't go into a house just because someone else was in it," Harry said firmly. "You should go into the house that suits you the best. That's what my wizarding guardian says, and I agree with him. You have to be true to yourself, or it's all no good and you'll never make friends with your housemates. And besides, I don't know where you read that Dumbledore was in Gryffindor, but--"

"Some red-haired boys on the second car up said that."

Draco snorted his contempt.

Harry shook his head. "I haven't read anywhere that Dumbledore was in Gryffindor. I don't know which house he was in. But it still doesn't matter. He's Dumbledore and you're you."

"Well--I don't suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad--"

Crabbe sniggered to Goyle, "Not if she's already memorized all the books!"

Hermione huffed, and took another strawberry.

"Your parents are muggles." Draco said flatly, as if astonished that he could be having such a conversation. "What do muggles do?"

She blinked at him uncertainly. "They're dentists. Both of them. Mum is actually--"

"What in Merlin's name is a 'dentist?'"

"Tooth healers," Harry translated for the purebloods. "They fill cavities in teeth and prevent tooth decay."

"Cavities?" Neville asked, all at sea.

"Tooth decay?" Draco ventured in helpless revulsion. "Muggles teeth rot? That's the most disgusting thing I ever heard."

Hermione asked eagerly, "Do you mean that witches and wizards never get cavities?"

"What's a cavity?" Crabbe wondered.

Harry explained. "When muggles teeth decay, they get holes in them called cavities, and dentists fill them with metal stuff so the teeth still work."

"That's not entirely--" Hermione contradicted.

"I think I may sick up--" Draco declared, at exactly the same time. "--and it was such a beautiful lunch otherwise."

Hermione could not let go of the subject, however much it disgusted Draco. "Are you saying that witches and wizards teeth are always perfect?"

"Naturally!"

"No," Neville answered. "You might get cursed and have your teeth broken or knocked out or they may go all funny or turn yellow. But they don't--rot," he muttered, feeling rather put off himself.

"That's very interesting," Hermione assured them all. Briskly, she rose and said, "Thank you for the snack, Harry. Don't you boys think you should change? I'm going to right away. We should be there soon, I'm sure, and you don't want to be improperly dressed and get into trouble!"

She bustled out officiously, leaving the boys gaping again.

Draco fumed, "So that's a muggleborn? Of all the rude, pushing, presumptuous--"

"Maybe she's nervous," Neville suggested mildly.

Draco dismissed that angrily. "Nervous? An arrogant, jumped-up nobody, telling Harry Potter she knows all about him, when she never laid eyes on him before today! Who does she think she is?"

"Hermione Granger?" Goyle guessed.

"Yeah--that's the name, innit?" Crabbe agreed.

"So her parents are Tooth Healers, are they?" Draco stormed on, flinging himself into his robes. "Why don't they do something about their daughter's mighty tusks, then?"

Harry had been rather annoyed by Hermione himself, but the word "tusks" made him protest, laughing in spite of himself. "Don't, Draco! That's awful!"

"So is she! No manners at all! 'Who are you?' What a way to talk! Uncouth little savage!"

From the running and banging in the corridors, it was clear that other people thought their journey was almost over. Harry pulled out his own robes. The ravaged hamper was repacked, and the trunk and bookbag closed up. The boys bumped a bit in the crowded space, and helped each other with stubborn buttons and sleeves gone inside-out. Draco even deigned to give Neville's robe a twitch to straighten it.

"Thanks," Neville murmured.

"Dont mention, it, Longbottom," Draco shrugged. "Quite nice meeting you--always good to know someone from a proper background with decent manners."

A voice echoed through the train: "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes time. Please leave your luggage on the train. It will be taken to the school separately."

Harry's stomach lurched with nerves, and Neville, he saw, looked pale. Draco was always pale, anyway, and so there was no reading anything into his complexion at the moment. The five boys joined the crowd thronging the corridor. The train slowed down and finally stopped. Students pushed their way toward the door and out onto a tiny dark platform. Harry shivered in the cold night air. Draco glanced at him, and gave him a tight smile.

Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and Harry heard a familiar voice: "Firs' years! Firs' years over here! All right there, Harry?"

Hagrid's big hairy face beamed over the sea of heads.

"Hagrid!" Harry called back, waving.

"C'mon, follow me--any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

"Who's that?" Neville asked anxiously. "He's huge!"

"Hagrid?" Draco asked at the same time. "Isn't he some sort of servant?"

"He's the Keeper of the Keys, and Professor Snape says he knows everything about the forest and its creatures. He's very nice," Harry assured his friends in a whisper.

Slipping and stumbling, they followed Hagrid down what seemed to be a steep narrow path. It was so dark on either side of them that Harry thought there must be thick trees there. Nobody spoke much. Neville groped at his pocket anxiously, and then sighed with relief. "Trevor's all right," he told Harry.

Hagrid called over his shoulder, "Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec. Jus' round this bend here."

The narrow path opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

A deep breath, and then a loud, collective "Ooooooh!"

Harry caught Draco's eye, and then both of them grinned in delight. Neville's round face was full of wonder. Even Crabbe and Goyle seemed impressed by their first sight of Hogwarts.

"Pretty, innit?" Crabbe muttered.

Before them was a fleet of little boats sitting in the dark water by the shore. Hagrid called, "No more'n four to a boat!"

Draco quickly gave orders to his minions. "Right, then. Vince--Greg--you go with Theo Nott over there and that boy with him. It must be Blaise Zabini, but I haven't seen him in years. Harry and I will take Longbottom with us, and--"

Hermione Granger pushed past a gaggle of girls and seated herself in their boat. Draco shut his mouth with a snap. Harry hid a smirk with his hand. Neville helped Hermione make sure that her robe was clear of the water.

"Everyone in?" shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself. "Right then--FORWARD!"

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

"Heads down!" yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff. They all bent their heads, and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbour, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

Harry whispered to Draco, quoting *The Wind in the Willows*, "'There is nothing so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats!'"

Draco did not understand the reference, but agreed, distracted and disarmed by the experience. "Quite fun, really. I've never been in a boat before."

"No more have I. I hope we do that again." Harry wondered if he could persuade Draco and Neville to read *The Wind in the Willows*. He was still unsure if he was Mole and Draco the Water Rat, or if Neville was Mole, Harry was Water Rat himself, and Draco was a bit like Toad. The one thing he was certain of was that Professor Snape was Mr Badger, Slytherin or not.

Hermione, however, had overheard, and did understand him. "'Simply messing about in boats--or with boats,'" she quoted back. Instantly, Harry felt much more friendly toward her, and gave her a smile as they clambered up a passageway in the rock following after Hagrid's

lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle.

They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge oak door. Hagrid called, "Everyone here?" He raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

"It is like being in a story," Hermione whispered to Harry. "I don't think my parents will quite believe me when I tell them about it."

Chapter 22

The door swung open at once. Harry was relieved to see Professor McGonagall looking entirely like herself, and no longer disguised as Aunt Petunia. Her face was set in the sternest lines, so he acknowledged her with only a small smile.

It had been decided that his relationship with Minerva McGonagall should not be public knowledge. That is, Professor Dumbledore had decided it. Harry supposed it was for the best, since there could be no secret about his situation with Professor Snape. He really didn't want other students to think he considered himself better or more important than anyone else. There was quite enough rubbish going on already about his scar and Voldemort. Or You-Know-Who.

That silly name was like nails across a blackboard to Harry. He even preferred the loaded title of Dark Lord. Anything but that stupid name that sounded like a guessing game. Surely Voldemort had had some sort of real name once, because "Voldemort" sounded pretty made-up to Harry. Of course, a lot of wizarding names sounded peculiar.

"The first years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

The entrance hall was every bit as grand as the outside of the castle had promised. Harry followed McGonagall across the stone floor, and looked about to find himself in the lead. Draco and Neville fell into step on either side of him, and Hermione was hurrying along, not wanting to miss anything. Draco gave her an indignant glare as she pushed ahead of them. Harry smiled and shook his head at Draco. There was a drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right. Harry supposed the rest of the school was already gathered.

Instead of going through the huge doors from where the voices came, Professor McGonagall led them into a small empty chamber off the hall. They crowded together. Hermione was standing just next to the Professor, and Draco caught Harry by the sleeve, determined to stake their own claim to a place near the Deputy Headmistress.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. She told them they would be joining the rest of the school for the start of term banquet shortly, but that when they entered the Great Hall, they would be sorted into their houses first. Harry had already heard much of this information before: he had been told about the points system and House Cup. He listened more carefully as Professor McGonagall named the houses, fancying she favored her own house somewhat by naming "Gryffindor" the first of all. And was there a slight drop of her voice as she put "Slytherin" last?

Harry had sensed that Professor McGonagall really, really did not want Harry to be in Slytherin. He was not sure how Professor Snape felt. While the Professor was very proud of his house, Harry had gathered that having his ward in his own house--and a celebrity like Harry at that--might put the Professor in an awkward position. The wizarding world was small and gossipy. And Voldemort had apparently had some relationship to Slytherin House. Who knew what people would make of Harry Potter in Slytherin?

"I shall return when we are ready for you," said Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly." She left the chamber.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione asked him, her breathing quick and ragged. "Do you think we'll have to do a spell to prove ourselves worthy?"

Ron Weasley blurted out, "Some sort of test, I reckon. Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking. I can't see that they really make us wrestle a troll."

Neville went white.

"Oh, for--" Draco snorted. "All you do is put on an old hat. My father told me all about it. The hat looks into your mind and sees where you should go. And if you don't like what it says, you tell it where you want to go. Of course," he sneered at Hermione. "That's only for students from wizarding families. Maybe you--muggleborn--really do have to do more. Maybe you have to recite pages and pages from your textbooks out loud by memory--" He smirked. "--But that shouldn't be a problem for you, since you already learned all the course books by heart."

"He's just taking the mickey," Harry assured her hurriedly, wondering how one revived girls if they fainted. "Draco likes to do that. If it's just a hat, it'll be a hat for all of us."

"How do you know?" demanded a tall thin boy. "Who made you Chief Warlock of the first years?" He pushed up to Harry aggressively, looking down his nose.

Harry would have stepped back, but Draco was behind him and hadn't moved. In a reasonable tone, Harry replied, "Because it only makes sense. Who would send eleven-year-olds to fight trolls? And if we're just starting school, why would we be expected to know everything already?"

The tall boy sneered. "You seem to think you know it all. Right. You're Famous Harry Potter. Do you sit in on the Governors' meetings and tell them what to do?"

Harry turned to Draco. "How did he know I was Harry Potter?" Back in the crowd, Harry saw Ron Weasley's ears turn pink. "Oh."

A girl plucked at the pushy boy's robes. "Zach!" she pleaded. "Stop it!" She said to Harry, rather helplessly, "He gets like this sometimes. I'm Hannah Abbott. This awful git is Zacharias Smith." Conscientiously, she offered Harry a small, soft hand.

"Hannah." He looked at the boy who had unaccountably taken a dislike to him. He had hoped that the days of attracting hostile notice were gone with the Dursleys. Apparently not. "Yes, I am, in fact, Harry Potter, and no, I don't sit in with the Governors. I guess there's an opening. Why don't you put your name in?"

There were snickers, and an appreciative "Good one, Harry!" from Draco. Zacharias clenched his fists and took a step forward. Harry braced himself, but jumped when several people behind him screamed.

He looked around and gasped. About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearl-white and slightly transparent,

they glided across the room talking to one another and hardly glancing at the first years. They seemed to be arguing. What looked like a fat little monk was saying, "Forgive and forget, I say. We ought to give him a second chance--"

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name, and you know, he's not really even a ghost--I say, what are you all doing here?"

A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first years.

Nobody answered.

"New students?" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be Sorted, I suppose?"

A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old house, you know."

"Move along now." Harry heard Professor McGonagall's familiar voice. She had returned and was waiting impatiently. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start. Form a line and follow me." The ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

Harry turned away, but heard Hermione's warning hiss to Zacharias Smith.

"You're going to get in trouble, fighting with Harry like that!"

"Yes," Hannah seconded. "What's the matter with you? What if you're in the same house?"

"No way am I going to be in the same house as that poser!" growled Smith.

He was shushed as they marched through the door behind Professor McGonagall. Harry forgot the silly dispute as the Great Hall was revealed. Everywhere he looked, there were shining candles and the

glint of gold. Most remarkable was the ceiling, velvety black and dotted with stars.

Hermione whispered, "It's bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in *Hogwarts, A History*."

"So did I," Harry murmured back. "But it's one thing to read about it, and another to see it!"

Professor McGonagall placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she placed a pointed wizard's hat. A patched, frayed, and dirty hat, which astonishingly began to sing in a human voice through a rip near the brim.

The Hat introduced itself and described the houses--after a fashion. Harry was hardly going to criticize the Hat's song. It was amazing simply to hear it.

"--You're in safe hands (though I have none)

For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The students applauded, and the Hat bowed to each table in turn. A hush settled over the Hall.

Professor McGonagall's voice sounded clear in the vast space. "When I call your name, you will put on the Hat and sit on the stool to be sorted. Immediately, she called, "Abbot, Hannah!"

Hannah stumbled up to the stool and put on the Hat, which was far too large for her and dropped down over her eyes.

Almost immediately, the Hat shouted "HUFFLEPUFF!" Hannah trotted happily to the Hufflepuff table, her yellow pigtails bobbing.

"Bones, Susan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Brocklehurst, Mandy!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Brown, Lavender!"

"GRYFFINDOR!"

The table on the far left exploded with cheers. Harry noticed that it had a number of redheads sitting there.

"Bulstrode, Millicent!"

--became the first Slytherin. Harry shifted restlessly, knowing he would have some time to wait. He wished he had had time to meet more of his new classmates. Crabbe and Goyle were soon sorted into Slytherin--something that puzzled Harry, since he could hardly describe either of them as "cunning," and certainly not as "ambitious." There must be more to the Sorting Hat's criteria.

Sometimes the Hat made up its mind quickly. Sometimes, however, it could take a long time. A sandy-haired boy named Seamus Finnegan sat on the stool for nearly a minute before being sent to Gryffindor.

"Granger, Hermione!"

Hermione ran forward and jammed the Hat on eagerly. There was a brief moment, and the Hat pronounced her a "RAVENCLAW!"

Hermione grimaced oddly, but then gave a brisk nod. Leaving the Hat neatly on the stool, she bustled off to join her house.

"Longbottom, Neville!"

Surprisingly, it didn't take long for the Hat to call, "GRYFFINDOR!" Poor Neville nearly collapsed with relief. He rushed away the Hat still on his head, until Professor McGonagall sent him back, amidst the gales of laughter. He grinned himself.

"Malfoy, Draco!"

No sooner had the Hat touched his head than it screamed, "SLYTHERIN!" Draco smirked in Harry's direction. Harry gave him a smile and a thumbs-up. His parents will be so pleased. And it's not like Draco isn't ambitious! He should be all right there. And he'll have Professor Snape to look after him.

And then, at last--

"Potter, Harry!"

The whispers spread like flames throughout the hall.

"Potter, did she say?"

"The Harry Potter?"

Hundreds of pairs of eyes were fixed on Harry. He was hardly aware of moving, but there he was suddenly: sitting with the Sorting Hat dropped down over his eyes.

"Hmm. Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes--and a nice thirst to prove yourself. Now that's interesting--So where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought back at the Hat. Put me where I'll have the most friends. And where I can be a good friend, too.

In his head, the Hat made a sound very like a laugh. "You've already made a number of friends, my lad. Each one of them is friends with a different Harry Potter. You have a friend in Slytherin. He was quite insistent that you should join him there. Slytherin would help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that--it's all there in your head.

And Gryffindor! You've a good friend there, too. If you want to be a hero, that's the place for a bit of derring-do and reckless adventure! You even have the beginnings of a good friend in Ravenclaw--a very good friend indeed--and it's not too late to make quite the scholar of you. That would score off those who thought you'd never amount to much!"

"I don't care about any of that--much", Harry told the Hat firmly. "I don't care about being powerful, or a hero, or beating people over the head with my cleverness. I'll work hard at school, all right--if only to make Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall proud of me. It might be better if I wasn't in either Gryffindor or Slytherin. I don't want to hurt Professor Snape's feelings or Professor McGonagall's, either. And I don't mind work. What I really want, though, are good friends. I want to belong to a jolly lot of good kids where I can be--Harry--just Harry!"

"Well--if you're sure--better be HUFFLEPUFF!"

A long, breathless pause. A burst of cheers from a table of boys and girls wearing black and yellow ties. Loud chatter and speculation at the other tables. Scowls, smiles, and whispers at the Head Table. Harry glimpsed Draco's annoyed, exasperated look and gave him a cheery wave.

Following the lead of Hannah Abbott, he made his way to the Hufflepuff table.

A handsome, athletic-looking boy cheered, "We got Potter!" The friendly ghost of the friar waved merrily at Harry. Harry grinned at him and at his fellow first years. Hannah patted the seat by her and he took it, feeling very much at home already. Then he looked anxiously up front to see how Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall were taking his Sorting.

Her face seemed pleasant enough. Perhaps the smile was a little forced, but she listened to the dumpy, delighted witch to her left and nodded agreement.

Professor Snape was looking straight at him. Harry shrugged and grinned a little helplessly, and spread his hands in a "What-can-I do?" way. Snape pressed his lips together, but did not seem particularly angry. His neighbor, however, was talking to the Professor. Harry recognized the purple-turbaned wizard as Professor Quirrell, and felt a chill of apprehension. He watched him a moment, and then flinched when the Defense Professor's eyes met his own.

"Ow!"

"What is it, Harry?" asked a little red-haired girl.

"Just a headache, I guess," he managed.

"You'll feel better after you eat," she told him seriously. "That's what my Auntie always says. I'm Susan Bones, by the way."

He gave her a nod, wondering when he would have a chance to talk to Professor Snape. He hoped he wouldn't have this kind of pain during every Defense class this year.

Other names were being called. The unpleasant boy--Zacharias Smith--was called forward, and sat nearly as long as Seamus Finnegan had before the hat called out, "GRYFFINDOR!" in a rather snappish way.

Red-haired Ron Weasley was also a Gryffindor, as he had wanted to be. He was greeted rapturously at his house table by a happy group of fellow redheads. Harry smiled and applauded dutifully. The dark-skinned boy, Blaise Zabini, was sorted into Slytherin, and the Sorting was complete.

Harry looked down at his empty gold plate, realizing that he was hungry again. The feast on the train seemed ages ago.

Albus Dumbledore got to his feet, beaming at the students, his arms opened wide.

"Welcome!" he said. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!

"Thank you!"

He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry wondered if he should be laughing or not.

"Is he-- a bit mad?" Harry wondered out loud.

The good-looking older boy Harry had noticed before leaned down the table to answer, "Mad? I daresay he is. Best wizard in the world, but a bit mad, too. I'm Cedric Diggory. Do you play quidditch, Harry?"

"I haven't played much," Harry confessed. "I've only just flown for the first time this summer, but I love it. Do you play?"

Cedric nodded eagerly, "Reserve Seeker last year. Perhaps I'll start this term. We've a pretty good lot of fliers in the House, but we take our turns, here in Hufflepuff."

Food appeared on the golden plates. Harry was accustomed by now to the wonders of elf cookery, but was still astonished at the variety here: bacon and steak, sausages, pork chops and lamb chops, boiled potatoes and roast potatoes, and for some strange reason, bowls of peppermint humbugs. Harry ignored the humbugs and loaded his plate with a little bit of everything. Alternating bites of juicy steak with everything else in reach, he listened to the conversation around him, trying to get to know these people with whom he would spend the next few years of his life.

A very nice-looking first year boy put out his hand to Harry. "Justin Finch-Fletchley. I was down for Eton, but magic, you know--"

"I do know!" Harry laughed, shaking his hand heartily.

"Ernest MacMillan, Ernie, really," was a serious-looking but friendly boy, with an oddly formal manner.

The last of the Hufflepuff first years was half-hidden on the other side of Susan. Sally-Anne Perks was a very pretty little girl, shorter even than Harry. Her dark hair was smoothed back in a neat bun on the nape of her neck.

"I haven't seen you about," Hannah was saying. "I haven't heard of any family named Perks. Are you muggleborn?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," answered the girl in a little silvery voice. "It was always me and Mum, and then when I got my letter, this bloke pops in. My Dad, Mum says. Hasn't seen him since before I was born, but it seems he's a wizard, and when he found out I was a witch, he got all interested in me." She made a face. "I was hoping for the Royal Ballet School, but there wasn't a place open, and my Dad insisted I come here and learn to be a proper witch. At least he's paying for it!"

"Your parents aren't married?" Hannah asked, wide-eyed and quietly shocked.

"You'd rather be a ballerina than a witch?" Justin asked, equally shocked.

"Well," Sally told them, bright and brittle. "I am a witch, whether I go to school for it or not, but you have to learn to be a ballerina." She added, "And you have to learn it while you're young, too." She looked briefly sad. "This isn't such a bad Plan B, though. This castle is amazing."

"That it is!" Harry agreed. He bit happily into his favorite, treacle tart.

When they were fairly gorged (all but Sally, who ate sparingly and sensibly), Dumbledore rose again, eyes twinkling. The hall fell silent.

"Ahem--just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you.

"First years should note the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well.

"I have also been asked by Mr Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch.

"And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Harry nearly laughed, and then saw that hardly anyone was taking the Headmaster's words as a joke. Harry stared, wondering what kind of school this was, and decided he would ask Professor Snape about the third-floor corridor as soon as possible.

"He's not serious?" Sally asked Susan in wonder. Susan shook her head and shrugged, her wide grey eyes on Dumbledore.

"He must be," Cedric told them softly. "But usually he gives a reason why we're not to go somewhere."

"And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!" cried Dumbledore. Harry noticed that the other teachers' smiles had become rather fixed.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick, and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables, and twisted itself, snakelike, into words.

"Everyone pick their favorite tune," said Dumbledore, "and off we go!"

Harry didn't actually have a favorite tune, and he mumbled the strange, whimsical words in a monotone. Sally-Anne Perks, he noticed, was scowling and covering her ears.

"Don't you like music?" shouted Hannah, over the din.

"I love music!" Sally-Anne screeched back, shaking her head.

At last it was over, except for two Gryffindors who had chosen a funeral march. When they were done, the Headmaster wiped his eyes, and said, "Ah, music! A magic beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!"

Two older students--prefects--led them away. Harry's legs were like lead, he was so tired and full of food. They seem to wander forever, up and down staircases, through echoing corridors, accompanied by the friendly ghost of the Friar. Finally they reached a large painting of two beautiful blonde women in ancient costume. Harry wondered if they were witches or goddesses--or witches who were worshipped as goddesses. One held a sheaf of wheat, and the other, rather younger one held a basket of flowers. She smiled as the children approached.

"Oh, look, Mamma! New students! We hope you'll be very happy here, little badgers."

The other witch--who certainly did not look old enough to be a mother--smiled herself, and asked, "Password?"

"Floribunda."

The picture swung away from the wall, revealing a round hole in the wall. Harry grinned at a baffled Justin, and clambered through after the prefect.

He found himself in a room at once commodious and cozy. Wall hangings of Hufflepuff yellow and black softened the high stone walls, and comfortable seating was grouped together--some around the huge stone hearth, where a noble fire blazed warmingly--some near a bank of tall, brilliantly-colored windows. Harry suspected the windows would be magnificent in daylight. There were study tables and bookshelves and a little raised platform, mysteriously draped with a velvet curtain the color of ripe wheat. He longed to look and touch, but the prefects were hurrying them on, urging them to come by the great fireplace.

"You lot can sit on the floor here," the tall girl told them. "We're having a Council of the Sett. Firsties and second years sit there so they can see."

The older students were crowding behind them. Some of the girls took seats on the squashy sofas and chairs and ottomans. The tallest boys stood behind, lounging casually. The crowd parted, as the dumpy witch Harry had noticed at the Head Table came bustling in.

"Gather 'round! Gather 'round!" she called, waving at them as if she wanted to hug them all. She came to a halt on the big flagged hearthstones and stood surveying the students of Hufflepuff House, beaming with affection.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "Here we are, primed for another splendid year! A new lot of badger cubs, and a likely lot they are!"

Harry felt himself flushing under her proud gaze, and glancing about, saw that he was not the only one. It was very nice to feel so welcome.

"I'm your Head of House, Professor Sprout. I teach Herbology at this fine old place, and I hope that every one of you will give your all this year. Each of you is special and gifted in different ways. I don't expect all of you to be brilliant at everything--"

"Some of us are!" called out an older boy with a grin, pointing at the good-looking boy who had spoken with Harry at dinner. Cedric-- Cedric Diggory, Harry remembered the name. He seems nice.

Singled out, Cedric blushed rosily, and shook his head.

Professor Sprout was having none of that. "No false modesty, Cedric! Now you lot listen to me, " she said more seriously, "especially you little cubs there, rolling about on the floor in front of the fire." Hannah and Susan giggled.

"Do you know what a Badger's lair is called? No? It's called a sett. That's the secret name for our digs here at Hogwarts---Common Room and dormitories and all. A badger's sett is his home and his fortress and his comfort. This is your safe place, and I won't have any

strutting or bullying or making fellow badgers miserable. It's one for all and all for one here in Hufflepuff House, as that muggle fellow wrote. Not a bad motto for us. Hogwarts Badgers stick together, because when we do, there's nothing we can't achieve!

"No doubt Professor McGonagall's given you a bit of a talk about House points and House Cups and all that. Cups are all very well, but they're not the most important part of your years at Hogwarts. You're here to become the finest witches and wizards you can be, each of you in your own way. You're here to become part of the community of witches and wizards, and to learn to live and work with all sorts of people. You're here to make friendships that will last the whole of your lives, and possibly even to meet the witch or wizard of your dreams!"

Laughter, and some preening and jostling among the older students.

Professor Sprout waved her hands for silence, and went on. "So while I wouldn't complain if a cup or two came our way, I won't be put out with you if they don't--as long as you've all done your best. If ever any of you need to talk to me, you come on in to my office and have a sit-down with me! We've got some fine prefects in this House, but I'm not one to slough it all on them and sit about taking tea and eating bonbons! You come see me if you've a mind to!

"You've a lot to take in, so I won't heap more on. You'll hear soon enough about our study groups and our talent nights. We badgers take care of our own. Now then, head on down to your rooms and sleep yourselves out! You'll find your luggage waiting. You'll get your class schedules at breakfast tomorrow. Boys left, girls right. Quick now!"

Prefects led the younger students away. Harry looked behind to see Professor Sprout chatting energetically with a cluster of older students. Hannah, Susan, and Sally disappeared around a corner, with waves and cries of "See you tomorrow!"

The boys followed the prefect down a long hall until they came to a series of round yellow doors. The prefect opened one, and motioned the boys in.

"This is for you firsties." He smiled slightly, and wished them goodnight.

Harry peered in, smiling himself at the cozy room. Their trunks and other gear were piled by the door. Three single tester beds, all draped about with dark yellow bed curtains, filled half of the room. There was a wide window seat, and a reading table with sturdy chairs. By the window was a perch where Hedwig came fluttering, just the boys took possession of the room.

"Hedwig!"

Harry rushed to greet her, hands running lovingly over the sleek white feathers. Justin and Ernie were admiring.

"She's a beauty," Ernie told Harry earnestly. "Snowy owls are particularly intelligent."

"Might I touch her?" Justin asked. "I haven't quite taken in the whole owl thing."

"Go ahead. And yes, Ernie, she's smart, all right."

The boys exclaimed over Hedwig for some time. Ernie had brought his pet kneazle, Widdershins, and that clever creature elicited more exclamations and introductions.

Harry was so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open, but even his trunk was an object of interest to his roommates.

"Look here, Harry," Ernie remarked. "Is that dragonhide?"

"As in actual dragons?" Justin asked.

"Yes," Harry yawned, swaying on his feet. "My dad's old school trunk. Hungarian Horntail. I'm going to bed before I fall over. Do you mind if I take the one nearest the window?"

He tumbled gratefully into the comfortable bed, wriggling down under the covers. Full of rich food and over-excited by events, he slept restlessly, plagued by anxious dreams. He was wearing Professor Quirrell's purple turban, which was telling him he had to be in Slytherin, because it was his destiny. Draco was laughing, telling him, "Come on, Harry! You'll like it! It's all in your head!" Professor Snape loomed over him, tugging angrily at the turban. Harry moaned, nearly waking, and rubbed absently at his scar. Then he rolled over and slept until morning.

N.A. Yes, I know this sorting will elicit comment and disagreement. I felt that Harry is too new to having people care about him not to worry about hurting feelings if he seemed to choose McGonagall's house over Snape's, or vice versa. Snape's encouragement of him to be true to himself would seem a subtle discouragement to insist on his parents' house. Harry knows enough about Slytherin to understand why it might cause unpleasant comment if he were in it. Furthermore, while Harry has some Slytherin traits, a lot of them might be tied to the horcrux and so are not part of Harry per se. As to Ravenclaw--I just don't see Harry there. Not that he isn't intelligent. As we know from canon, very brilliant people are sometimes in houses other than Ravenclaw. Harry is not a scholar by nature, or if he was, his years with the Dursleys have quashed it. He will make better grades in this story than in canon, because he now has individuals who will be monitoring his progress, and who have given him the tools he needs to succeed at Hogwarts.

In the end, though, I chose Hufflepuff because I believe Harry will be very happy there. What a concept! Happy!Harry. I also think that sometimes people go into houses not because they already have the hallmark traits of the house, but because they desire them (Peter Pettigrew in Gryffindor) or because they need them. I think a healthy respect for hard work and loyalty would be extremely good for Harry. Hard work has been tainted in the past by the Dursleys' demands, and Harry hasn't had much experience of people being loyal to him, but all that is about to change.

And as to Ron--no, this is not an evil!Ron story. If I cavil at calling eleven-year-old Tom Riddle evil, you should guess I certainly wouldn't create an evil Ron. However, he and Harry did not meet well,

and Harry has already made those crucial other first friends. Ron and Harry may be friends eventually, but that will take time, and there will be many bumps along the way.

I enjoyed some of the comments about Wind in the Willows. All right, I agree: Neville is Mole, Harry is the Water Rat (dear old Ratty is my favourite, anyway), and Draco is Toad. Hmm. I may do something with this later. Snape is certainly Mr Badger. And let's not forget Hermione's patronus!

Chapter 23

While the students were fast asleep and dreaming in their dormitories, the House Heads faced something of a crisis.

The Headmaster, it seemed, was somewhat dissatisfied with the events of the Sorting, and had requested some "trifling alterations" to the schedules of the first years. Working out those alterations had required three hours--and counting, now.

"Never! In all my years..." Minerva's words faded into angry mutters as she tried out the various configurations. "Gryffindor and Slytherin Astronomy? No. That conflicts with the second year Charms class for--"

Snape saw Filius and Pomona giving each other significant looks.

Filius whispered, "Really, Severus! Is all this necessary? First the Headmaster wants the first years in a straightforward Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff, Slytherin/Gryffindor division, and now it's unsatisfactory? All very inconvenient, I must say."

"It's because of young Harry Potter, isn't it?" Pomona asked with smothered excitement. "Such a pleasant boy. I watched him during the feast--and after, and it seems to me he's settling in quite nicely--whether some like it or not!" Her eyes shifted to Minerva, who looked up.

"I don't deny I would have liked to have had Harry in my house, but I wouldn't have caused all this fash because he wasn't!" Minerva answered sharply. "The Headmaster says he wants him to know students from other houses: especially those 'jolly Gryffindor lads.'" She sniffed.

Snape smirked. "Well, he'll get to know some 'jolly Slytherins,' too. There's nothing else to be done."

That was only too true. The schedule had been rewritten twice, and was still not exactly what the Headmaster was hoping for. Changing even a single class at this point knocked down other schedules like

dominos. They were almost finished now, and Dumbledore would simply have to lump it. After hours of work, Harry would still have only Defense, Astronomy, and History with Gryffindor. And the only way any of this was even possible was by combining all the houses together for History.

"But that's hardly a problem, since there's no practical work requiring close supervision," Pomona comforted them. "It's not a bad schedule at all, when looked at the right way. All the first-year students will meet in class and get to know one another, and that should only be to the good, shouldn't it?"

There were reluctant nods. Even Snape was inclined to agree. He hated teaching Slytherins and Gryffindors simultaneously. House rivalry for points exacerbated the traditional hostility and led to some very dangerous behavior. Minerva had often pointed out to him that those classes seemed to bring out the worst in him. He would rather drink Amorentia than admit it, but it was only too true. It was so much easier teaching Hufflepuff and Ravenclaws. Peer pressure to behave and work hard--and the passionate desire to learn and excel--worked wonders on a classroom. He tried out the new configuration in his mind and felt some hesitant approval. Hufflepuff/Slytherin? Ravenclaw/Gryffindor? The Claws stood for no nonsense if their grades were in danger. The Hufflepuffs and Slytherins had no history of antagonism, though each sneered a bit at the other house. Hard work and ambition might make for a quiet, well-focused class. Draco would be pleased. He had wanted to partner Harry in Potions, and now, it seemed, he might have the opportunity.

"Are you very disappointed, Severus?" Pomona asked. "We all heard that you are young Harry's wizarding proxy."

Snape shrugged, coming to the decision that perhaps he had not needed that additional source of stress. He was satisfied that Harry was not a Gryffindor.

He replied, "No. After some thought, I believe it is for the best. Harry should be where the Hat placed him. He's longed for friends, never knowing wizarding children before this summer. He needs a friendly, welcoming environment. He doesn't need to be constantly reminded

that he's the Boy-Who-Lived, and that much is expected of him. Treat him like the others, Pomona. He'll thank you for it."

"Yes," Minerva agreed more wistfully. "The Hat has decided. I'm sure he'll do splendidly in Hufflepuff. He'll make us all proud. But he's a very brave lad all the same," she added, with a touch of asperity.

"And a clever one, or so I'm told," Filius grinned. "He's been doing a bit of extra reading. His mother was such a splendid Charms student."

Snape nodded, sipping his tea.

Harry tried to ignore the whispers that followed him everywhere he went for the next week, once he left the safe confines of Hufflepuff territory. Girls giggled, boys swaggered, and everyone asked to see his scar. Some of the bolder girls even wanted to touch it. Harry backed away from these lunatics, and his fellow firsties closed ranks around him.

Ernie had taken Justin aside, and Susan and Hannah had done likewise with Sally, giving both newcomers to the wizarding world the full story of You-Know-Who and The-Boy-Who Lived. Both were very impressed, but everyone followed the instructions mandated by their Head of House. Harry was not to be stalked or harassed, but treated like any other Badger of the Sett.

It was not so easy, though, once beyond the door of the common room. Fortunately, Hufflepuff House was well organized, with older students mentoring the younger ones, teaching them all the halls, byways, and staircases of Hogwarts. They were warned about Peeves the Poltergeist, and instructed not to irritate the grumpy caretaker, Mr Filch.

"He can get very nasty," Cedric told Harry, as he showed the first years the way to the lecture hall used for the combined History Class.

Professor Snape had forewarned him, but Harry had found it hard to credit that their History Professor was an actual ghost. The class was incredibly boring--even though Harry enjoyed reading the textbook. Professor Binns droned on in a monotone, making even the most dramatic events as dry as dust. Harry consoled himself with seeing all his friends. Draco sat by him and they compared schedules and played Hangman when Binns began reciting the endless genealogy of the extinct goblin clan of Skauraug. It was that or a nap, certainly. Harry was disappointed, having hoped for better.

Much more satisfactory was Charms, taught by Professor Flitwick, a tiny wizard who had to stand on a pile of books to see over his desk. He squeaked with delight when he called out Harry's name on the roll, and toppled out of sight. The class chuckled, and the diminutive teacher chuckled as well. He seemed to know his subject, though, and Harry remembered that his mother had excelled at Charms. He hoped he would, too.

Astronomy was taught at night on Tuesdays and was a novelty of sorts. Learning the names of stars and how to identify the planets was quite interesting, though Harry found the Gryffindors the roughest of all the other students. Zach Smith made a point of bumping into Harry, just as Harry had managed to find Jupiter with his telescope.

"Sorry, Potter," the boy said loudly, not sounding sorry at all. The boys next to him, Weasley and Finnegan, snickered. Harry tried to ignore them, and had to start all over again. Finding a planet was harder than it seemed. He concentrated on focusing the instrument, and was startled a few moments later when he heard a thud and a crash behind him.

"What's all this?" asked Professor Sinistra sharply, coming over to find Zach measuring his length on the cold floor of the Astronomy Tower.

"I'm not sure, Professor," Justin Finch-Fletchley answered. "We were observing Jupiter, and Smith must have backed up into us. Sorry there, Smith," he said kindly, offering a hand to help him up. Smith

glared at the hand and the innocent faces of the Hufflepuffs, and fumbled to pick up his broken telescope.

"Stand back, Smith," said Sinistra. "I'll have it fixed in a flash. It happens all the time. Find a place--over there--and don't fidget while you're working. Use your focuser, and don't step backwards trying to get a clear view. You could trip and fall from the Tower."

Harry was looking forward to seeing Professor McGonagall in Transfiguration. She gave him a faint smile of greeting, but immediately plunged into the subject. He was not surprised at her demeanour--strict and serious. But she was wonderfully clever, and after a brief warning about the dangers of Transfiguration, she impressed the class by turning her desk into a pig and back again. This class, like Charms, included the Ravenclaws. Harry noticed Hermione hanging on the Professor's every word, her hand up and waving at every question. He noticed some of the other Ravenclaw girls looking at each other and rolling their eyes.

Their own assignment was exactly what Professor McGonagall had warned Harry it would be. They were given matches and told to try to turn them into needles. Having watched her at work and heard her explanations for the past month, he was able to grasp a bit of the theory, and succeeded in making his match silvery and pointy. The eye eluded him, but Professor McGonagall seemed pleased, and gave him another little smile.

Hermione seemed to have done as well, and spoke to him after class.

"Hello, Harry! How are your classes? Mine are so fascinating. Have you met Professor Quirrell yet? He told us about he got rid of a zombie for an African prince! That's why he wears that turban, you know: it was a thank-you present. I have Potions next. It's nice talking with you! I'll see you later!"

She was off before he managed a word. Justin and Ernie burst out laughing. Hannah and Susan tutted and shook their heads.

"Poor thing," remarked Hannah. "She hasn't a clue."

"She's all right," Sally spoke up in her little voice. "She doesn't mean any harm."

Harry got the impression that Sally felt a little left out by Susan and Hannah, who had known each other for years and were already close friends. He made a point of sitting with her, since Justin and Ernie seemed to have found common ground in their talks about their complicated, eccentric, well-to-do families. Harry had nothing to contribute to such conversations, but the boys were friendly to him, and had learned quickly not to ask him awkward questions about his own home life.

Susan said, "We know she doesn't, Sally. She's just so---I don't know--so different. She says and does such odd things. It's not that she's muggleborn, exactly. Oh, stop, Justin! You don't go gabbling at people like that. It's like she doesn't really know how to behave. Just look at the way she acts in class. She's terribly pushy and overbearing. She tries too hard. Lisa tells me she doesn't quite fit in with them."

Hannah added, "It must be very awkward. Lisa and Mandy and Padma and Morag all know each other so well, and then in comes this complete stranger --"

"--who acts like she knows all about the wizarding world, but doesn't--" agreed Susan.

Hannah nudged her. "--and who sleeps in their dormitory and goes everywhere with them. Of course it's only reasonable--she is their housemate after all--but it makes them uncomfortable. They feel she just isn't their sort."

"She probably feels the same way." Sally muttered.

Susan reached out to touch her shoulder in concern, but Sally scowled and walked a little faster.

"Wait! Sally!" Harry ran after her and gave her a smile. He murmured, "Nobody's saying that you're not our sort."

Sally sniffed, and said nothing more. Quietly, they moved on to Herbology, where Professor Sprout was delighted to see them.

After his background reading and his conversations with Professor Snape, the Defense Against the Dark Arts class turned out to be something of a joke. Harry remembered the turban and the reek of garlic and the stammer that made it hard to pay any attention at all to the timid young professor. He was reluctant to look up and meet the teacher's eyes, remembering the curious pain in his scar that he had experienced in this wizard's presence. As far as the course material was concerned, however, Harry was relieved to find that Professor Snape had been right: Harry was not miles behind everyone else. In fact, some of the work seemed ridiculously easy compared to the amazing feats he had seen performed by Snape and McGonagall--even easy compared with the material they had expected him to learn last month. He felt restless and wondered when they would do something---well--magical.

Thursday afternoon came, and with it Harry's first Potions class. He anxiously reread the first three chapters of his textbook the night before, muttering the names and uses of ingredients. He was not alone: Professor Sprout was an ardent believer in collective effort, and Wednesday nights were to be set aside for the first year study group. Attendance was mandatory, and they were joined by Cedric Diggory, who had been assigned to mentor them. He had the highest grades in his year, and mentoring study groups, he told them, was something Professor Sprout looked for in students who aspired someday to be prefects or quidditch team captains.

"Calm down, Harry!" Cedric reassured him with a smile. "You seem to already have the first year material down pretty thoroughly. I don't think you'll have anything to worry about tomorrow."

"Especially since Professor Snape is your guardian!" agreed Ernie.

"He's my wizarding proxy," Harry corrected him automatically. "My Aunt Petunia is my guardian."

"Whatever," agreed Justin, indulging him. "We're just saying that you're obsessing."

"I don't want to let him down," Harry muttered.

Cedric gave him a smile that was light-hearted, but without mockery. "Somehow I don't expect that to be a problem."

Harry knew that Potions classes were held in the dungeons. He marched in at the head of the Hufflepuff contingent and paused, rather distracted by the shelves of glass jars full of floating animals and random bits. Ernie walked into him and stumbled. There were giggles from the girls as they sorted themselves out and headed to the front of the room, where Harry insisted on sitting. A moment later, the Slytherins were crowding into the room, chattering in excitement.

"Harry!" Draco called, looking very collected and at home. "A decent class at last! Could you believe that buffoon Quirrell?" He raised his brows at the rest of the Hufflepuffs, and nodded to Ernie, Susan, and Hannah.

Harry admitted that he could not quite believe their Defense teacher, and allowed Draco to lead the way to the places immediately in front of the professor's desk.

Draco spoke in a whisper. "Who are the others--that boy and the little girl? Are they--muggleborn?"

Harry sighed. "Sally-Anne is a halfblood like me. Justin is from a very wealthy and prominent family."

"Really?" asked Draco, surreptitiously trying to take another look at Justin's clean profile. "I don't recognize the name--Finch--or something? There were some Finches in Upper Flagley, years ago, but I thought the family was extinct."

"Justin Finch-Fletchley. His father is very high up in the Foreign Office. His mother is Lady Barbara Fitzwilliam, daughter of the Earl of Matlock."

"I knew it," shrugged Draco, losing interest. "Muggles."

Harry huffed in exasperation, but had no time to say anything more, for the door slammed open, and Professor Snape was striding swiftly into the room. Briskly, he took the roll, and paused at Harry's name.

"Harry Potter," he said. "Our new celebrity."

Draco shot Harry a look from the corner of his eye. On his other side, Susan and Hannah giggled, and behind him, Justin gave him a nudge. Harry knew he was for it.

But not yet. Professor Snape, dark and commanding, wished to give them an introduction to his realm.

"You are here," he declared, "to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses. I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death--if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Harry hoped he would do nothing today that would brand him forever as a dunderhead. He stole a glance at Draco, who was nearly glowing with excitement, and Draco gave Harry a look in return. This was going to be a great class.

There was a dramatic pause, and then Professor Snape called out, "Potter!"

Harry's head snapped up, his heart pounding.

"What," asked Professor Snape, "would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

A split-second of terror, and then Harry saw the words on the page in his mind's eye.

"The Draught of the Living Death, Professor: a powerful sleeping potion."

Snape's black eyes raked over the silent students, who waited breathlessly for the verdict.

"Correct. It seems that Mr Potter understands that fame isn't everything. Five points to Hufflepuff."

Justin's boot nudged him again, and Harry heard Ernie's sigh of heartfelt relief.

"Malfoy! Where would you look if I told you find me a bezoar?"

"In the stomach of a goat, sir," answered Draco without hesitation. Harry gave him a faint grin.

"Correct. Five points to Slytherin."

"Well done, Draco!" whispered a Slytherin girl on Draco's other side. Snape ignored her.

"Very well," he said, as if grudgingly measuring out a dram of approval. "Since some of you have deigned to open your books, I will permit you to attempt a simple potion this very day. Page five. The Olivine Boil Cure. You will work in pairs."

Harry had already been tacitly claimed by Draco, and the rest of the room seemed to sort itself out quickly--all but Sally-Anne, who looked about, at a loss.

Draco hissed to the pug-faced girl on his other side, "Pansy! Tell Millicent to pair up with the Perks girl. It's all right. She's a halfblood."

Harry overheard, and gritted his teeth. He really needed to have another talk with Draco.

"Sally-Anne is a really nice girl," he hissed in his turn.

Draco clearly did not comprehend. "Oh, good," he answered absently, already weighing some dried nettles. "Rather pretty, too."

They had work to do, and Harry tried to put Draco's irritating prejudices aside for the moment. Fires were lit and ingredients were crushed. Professor Snape prowled the room, uttering the odd scathing comment, and eventually gravitated to Harry and Draco, praising their stewed horned slugs. There was a frantic, hushed scramble behind them when Justin nearly added porcupine quills prematurely, but Ernie's quick warning forestalled a disaster.

At length they were done, and taught how to bottle and label their products. An essay was assigned, and Harry conscientiously added it to his planner. All in all, it had gone quite well--but for Draco's tactless remarks. Harry looked around and saw Sally, pale and serious, finishing up her potion along with a very big Slytherin girl. They were an ill-assorted pair, but they seemed to have worked together well enough. Susan and Hannah were whispering secrets, as always.

Snape dismissed them, and said, "Potter. Remain after class."

Draco gave him a grin and a wave, and was off, chatting with Vince and Greg.

Harry came up to the teacher's desk and waited. Snape looked over his head at the huddle of small Hufflepuffs.

"Why are you lot still here?"

"Please sir, we're waiting for Harry." answered Susan, with clear-eyed innocence.

"Then wait outside," Snape growled.

A quick retreat ensued, and the door closed behind them. Snape looked at Harry rather quizzically. "Do they believe you are in need of protection?"

"It's not that, Professor. We go everywhere together. Professor Sprout told us to. It's nice to have friends who stick together. It would be the same no matter who you asked to stay behind."

"Really?"

"Of course!"

"If you say so. You did well today, Harry. It was a remarkably successful first class. I am informed that your work and demeanour have been quite satisfactory all week."

"I'm doing my best, sir."

"Good. Come to my quarters for tea on Saturday at four. You can tell me your impressions of Hogwarts. The entrance is two corridors further down from this class. Turn left at the painting of the three witches. I'll keep an eye out for you."

"I'll be there, sir!"

"Get along, get along! You have Charms next, I believe. Don't be late. It's very disrespectful!"

N.A. I am very, very pleased at the response to this story. So many of you have given me such encouragement and such useful criticism. It seems most of you are indulging my fancy for Happy!Hufflepuff!Harry.

As to Hermione--I'm going to try something a bit different here. No one doubts for a moment that Hermione has the brains for Ravenclaw, but I believe that personal dynamics would play a role in anyone's adjustment to his or her house. If you have four girls who are already good friends, and you drop a girl from a totally different background into that situation, all sorts of possibilities arise. In thinking about Hermione in Ravenclaw, I was forced to consider Luna Lovegood's experiences there. However, Hermione is not Luna, and a similar scenario would play out differently. Originally I was going to put Hermione in Gryffindor, but thinking though what life without Harry in

that house might be like (we already know that Lavender and Parvati formed a tight bond with no discernable room for Hermione), I hadn't the heart. Of course, not knowing what we know, Harry might feel guilty for giving Hermione what appears at first glance to have been bad advice. It's early days for all of them, anyway.

I'm very sorry I'm so behind at replying to my reviewers. At the moment it's all I can do to get a chapter out a week. With a very demanding, full-time job, daily visits to my mother in a nursing home, trying to get my deceased brother's house on the wretched real estate market, helping my nephew find a job--and a place to live--and sell the house's contents to a variety of dealers--I am overwhelmed. Walking pneumonia this week didn't help.

Chapter 24

By the end of the week Harry had come to the conclusion that Hogwarts could be a very hard place for misfits.

"But I wrote the essay!" Hermione Granger was almost crying. "Truly I did, Professor Flitwick! I worked ever so hard. I don't know where it is!"

At his seat beside Sally in Charms class, Harry studied the Ravenclaw girls. Two of them, Morag McDougal and Mandy Brocklehurst, were smirking. They looked at each other, and seemed hard-pressed not to burst out laughing. Mandy saw Harry glaring, and gave him a quick shrug. He narrowed his eyes until she looked away.

Yesterday, Hermione had come to breakfast without her tie. One of the Hufflepuff prefects told him that it was an old and bad tradition among the Ravenclaw girls to hide the possessions of dorm mates who failed to fit in.

"They say it's good for their education--just another riddle for them to solve--but I call it mean," said the prefect with a sniff. "Ravenclaws can be very cruel."

"Can't you talk to a Ravenclaw prefect?" Harry asked angrily.

"That's not a good idea," she told him. "The Ravenclaw prefects must know all about it. Things would just get worse for her. She'll have to learn to handle it herself, poor thing."

"It might be easier," Harry snapped, "if she had a clue what there was to handle. She doesn't know what's happening. She doesn't know about stupid Ravenclaw traditions. She's muggle-raised, like me. I hate bullies, and that is just cowardly bullying."

Now they were hiding her essays. They were a nasty lot, and probably jealous, too. Hufflepuffs traditionally had classes with Ravenclaws, and knew all their tricks. Hermione was clearly a very bright girl, and the teachers had already noticed her talent. It would probably not sit well with the other Ravenclaws, full of pride in their

own intelligence, to see a muggleborn come out of nowhere and top them in class.

"If I were in Ravenclaw," Sally whispered to him, "they'd probably do the same to me."

Harry nodded. It was a nod meaning, "I hear what you're saying," rather than a nod of agreement. He did not think the Ravenclaws would have treated her the same at all. After all, Sally was doing well enough in class, but was not showing up--every single day--the rest of the House renowned for intellect. Sally was a very pretty girl and had a nice way about her. Harry had noticed, even in muggle school, that both students and teachers often favored those who were the most physically attractive. It wasn't fair, and it certainly had nothing to do with one's ability as a student, but there it was. Harry, scrawny, bespectacled, and poorly dressed, had never been a teacher's pet, or even attracted other classmates to the degree they would think him worth braving Dudley and his bullies. It was different for him here at Hogwarts, but it made him a little sad to wonder if that was due to his contact lenses, his fine boots, and his dragon-hide trunk.

Even when Sally did things in the dorm that Hannah and Susan found rather mad--most especially the strange exercises she performed for an hour every morning--they laughed it off and were friendly to her. Hannah and Susan were close friends, but were gradually warming to the new girl. There were certainly confusions and misunderstandings. Sally knew nothing about the wizarding world, and Susan and Hannah practically nothing about the muggle one.

Harry faced similar problems in his own dorm, when he and Ernie and Justin talked together. Complicating the matter, he and Justin came from such entirely different muggle backgrounds, that they too had little in common. There must be a way to bridge the gap.

It was in the library on Saturday morning that he had his brilliant idea. At least, he was given the credit later on. The idea was actually Hermione Granger's, of course.

The six first-year Hufflepuffs found that they fit nicely at a library table in a corner near the Charms section. Harry dutifully completed his

fifteen inches for Herbology, and let his mind wander. It didn't seem fair. If Professor Snape hadn't given him that book about wizarding customs, he would have bumbled about like an idiot...

"I am an idiot!" he announced, apropos of nothing. The table dissolved into muffled laughter.

"You're expecting an argument?" Susan asked archly.

"No! I mean--oh, belt up!" Grinning himself, Harry told them about Professor Burbage's book in an undertone, looking warily toward Madam Pince's desk. "When Professor Snape took me to Diagon Alley for the first time, he gave me some books to help me understand the wizarding world. They really helped. Manners and family histories and all. Draco Malfoy's father keeps proposing that those of us raised muggle should be given a special class, but nothing's come of that."

"We'll teach you manners, Harry," Hannah promised with a giggle. "Trust us!"

Justin fastened on Harry's idea right away. "Could I borrow that book, Harry? Professor McGonagall told my family a few things when she visited, but I can tell there's a lot more to know."

"Me, too, Harry!" Sally whispered. "These two--" she mock-glared at Hannah and Susan "--won't tell me why they think I'm funny."

"It's because you're so cute and adorable," Susan teased her. "What's the name of the book, Harry?"

"So You've Found Out Magic is Real! by Charity Burbage. She teaches Muggle Studies here. It helped me a lot."

"Charity Burbage!" Ernie considered. "My family knows her family--or did. When we had the troubles with You-Know-Who--well, they up and left--left the country entirely and went to New Zealand! There are only a handful of magicals there, and Professor Burbage was the eldest of her brothers and sisters, and the only one who finished

Hogwarts before they left. The rest were taught at home and took their N.E.W.T.s through the ICW."

"What's the ICW?" Sally wondered.

The wizard-raised at the table stared at her in utter astonishment.

"International Council of Wizards. It's in the book," Harry promised her. "Professor Snape says she's pretty smart, but she's upset because she has to use this old book for Muggles Studies that was written about a million years ago, and it's no good at all. A relative of one of the governors wrote it, and she can't change it. Anyway her book is brilliant--"

At the next table, he saw Hermione Granger, trying to overhear without being noticed. He raised his voice slightly, "I don't mind lending the book, as long as I get it back. Take a look tonight, if you like."

Hermione slipped from her chair and came over to their table. "I think," she declared, "that there should be a study group or a club for those of us new to magic. We could share what we've learned and help each other."

"Sounds good to me," Sally agreed.

Hannah and Susan stared in surprise. Ernie opened his mouth to speak, but then thought again.

Justin nodded. "Sometimes I feel thick as a plank. Everyone assumes I know what they're talking about, and I don't. I talked to Terry Boot in Ravenclaw, and he agrees. Did you mention this to him?" he asked Hermione.

She sniffed. "Terry doesn't talk to me."

"Here, now!" Hannah protested. "What this about a club for muggleborns? Are you saying we aren't invited?"

"Of course you can be members," Harry told her hastily. "You can be special guest speakers, and give lessons about the wizarding world."

"If it's a real Hogwarts club," Hermione said, "we'll need a professor to sponsor us. Professor Snape is your guardian, Harry. Could you ask him?"

Harry grimaced, imagining what the Professor would say if Harry asked him to spend yet more time with a lot of 'dunderheads and nitwits,' his usual description of Hogwarts students. But it was such a good idea...

"I'll ask him," he promised. "He can find us a place to meet, at least, and we can look at Professor Burbage's book all together."

"We can have treats after," Susan suggested. "Everyone likes treats."

"Treats?" Ernie considered. "Maybe I should come too. Represent the family and all that. I can tell you my family history. That sort of thing. What sorts of treats, anyway?"

Snape scrubbed at his tired eyes, and slumped back into his worn leather chair. The pitiless book stared up at him, mocking him. Since returning to Hogwarts, he had spent hours in the library, trying to understand the nature of Harry's mysterious scar, and its link to Snape's Dark Mark. The results of his studies were not encouraging.

The Hogwarts library was one of the best in the wizarding world, and yet there were disturbing gaps in its Dark Arts collection. An essential reference book was missing from the library, and had been for many years. The subject was so shocking that he had hesitated to ask Lucius if he owned the book himself. Finally, he had lied, claiming to be studying inferii, and Lucius had lent him the fabulously rare volume, after exacting an Unbreakable Vow to return it within one month.

A horcrux? Could that be the answer? The Dark Lord, his soul shredded by countless murders, had cast the Killing Curse at Harry,

and somehow a bit of that tattered spirit had become lodged in the intended victim.

His mind probed the horror of it fearfully, timid as a man who fears his leg is broken touches his bruised, swollen flesh. Snape shrank from the idea. The thought of a piece of that vile creature inside Lily's son was more than disturbing: it was repulsive--abominable.

He dared not make notes. He dared not hint at it to anyone. He doubted that Minerva had ever heard of such anathema, and Dumbledore...

Snape was particularly uneasy at the idea of revealing this to Dumbledore. It might certainly cause the Headmaster to see Harry in a new and possibly dubious light. Snape was already concerned about Dumbledore's cavalier attitude toward the boy's physical safety and emotional health. If Harry's innocence seemed tainted by the existence of a shred of Voldemort's foul being within him, Snape could well imagine how much more likely Dumbledore would be to regard Harry as expendable. Snape had been expendable in his day--no, it was foolish to flatter himself. He was still entirely expendable if the game was deemed worth it. He would not allow Dumbledore to treat Harry in a similar way. He must proceed without the Headmaster's help.

But Snape was a grown man and a powerful wizard, and he could not shrink from such a challenge. If he could free Harry from this monstrous curse, it would redeem his lifelong interest in the Dark Arts. It would even seem the design of Fate for his path to cross with Harry's own. Who else had the knowledge to understand Harry's danger, but Snape himself? Who else the cunning, the power, the resources to identify and conquer this threat?

A horcrux. He must not hide from the truth, but face it rationally. It made all sorts of sense. It could explain, above all, why a ghost of the Dark Mark lingered, why Dumbledore sensed that the Dark Lord, though disembodied, still existed on this mortal plane. It certainly would explain why Harry was a parselmouth. A thread of alien intelligence, lurking unsuspected in the innocent boy...

It could not have been intentional, surely. Why in the world would a being seeking immortality hide a portion of himself in the fragile shell of a child? Perhaps the Dark Lord brought something with him that night that would have been the real horcrux. Or could it have been an attempt at possession? Why? Could it have been an accident? A bizarre happenstance? Did the Dark Lord cast the Killing Curse at Harry at all? Perhaps his soul was already compromised when he cast the curse at Lily. It was just one Killing Curse too many, and his soul fell to pieces. A stray fragment was blasted into the child--

Or perhaps the Old Magic Lily had come across had given her certain powers. Not to shield herself, but to protect her child. Perhaps that was why the scar was in the shape of that mysterious rune of power. There were hints in other books. Perhaps somehow Lily had tricked the Dark Lord into an implied contract. Snape accepted that he might never know. Minerva refused to discuss the book they had found at the cottage. She said only that she was sharing the contents with certain friends of hers. Female friends, obviously. Well, good luck to her.

If Lily had cast such a protection, how could a shred of the Dark Lord enter into the child? He was a very powerful wizard, of course. A shred, then, had survived, but the protection was also powerful, and had largely sealed the intruder off from the boy's consciousness. However, the parseltongue ability had leaked across the divide. What else? And how--oh, how?-- to rid Harry of it?

That was the sticking point. There were a number of possibilities. Exorcisms, cleansing rituals, potions--all dangerous in the extreme, especially because of the length of time the soul fragment had dwelt within the host--nearly the boy's entire life. Removing it could do unimaginable harm, especially in these formative years. A failed attempt could drain Harry's magic--even kill him. The fragment of the Dark Lord might fight back and seize control of the boy. Or the soul shard might emerge and immediately attempt to fasten on another host...

He made a mental note: Must research containment charms/magical traps...

A knock at the door. A light, quick knock, lower down on the door than any of his prefects.

"Come in, Harry."

The boy looked older already, after only a week at Hogwarts. More assured, more comfortable with himself, at ease in his uniform. Snape put his concerns aside, and set about enjoying the boy's company.

"Hogwarts seems to suit you," Snape remarked.

"Too right it does!" Harry grinned. "I love it here. Even if some of my classes aren't the best--" He shrugged at Snape's severe expression. "Professor, I'm not going to pretend that History class is anything but a snore. And Defense is a joke."

"Defense ought not to be a joke."

"I agree, sir, but there you are. Professor Quirrell has us reading the first chapter out loud in class. I think I know every word now. Shall I recite it for you?"

"None of your cheek," Snape grunted. "When you come to tea next week, bring Viridian's book with you and we'll work on some hexes. Between us, it's useless to depend on Defense teachers. A sorry lot they are."

"Because the position is cursed," Harry said. The professor had told him about the curse weeks ago. "Why doesn't Professor Dumbledore break the curse? Why doesn't anybody?"

"I don't honestly know how hard the Headmaster has tried. Perhaps he likes the infinite variety of yearly instructors. What I can tell you is that the curse has proved remarkably persistent and elusive. So elusive, in fact, that the fact the position is cursed is not accepted universally, though I agree with the Headmaster in this case. However, in order to lift a curse, one needs to know which curse was used and how it is grounded to the cursed object or individual. In the past, the Governors contracted with Gringotts for some

cursebreakers, but that proved unsuccessful and quite disastrous for the individuals involved. I think that the Headmaster now simply wants to wait until the Dark Lord is utterly and completely gone."

Harry scowled. "But lots of curses outlive the caster," he objected. "Like the curses on all those Egyptian tombs in the Path of Darkness. The casters have been dead for thousands of years!"

"True. Once again, it depends on the curse used. It is entirely possible that the Dark Lord used a variant that was tied to his life force. He often did so. We can but hope."

Harry's expression caused Snape to snort a laugh. They talked of other things: about the pleasures of Hufflepuff house with its study groups and the promise of its Games Nights and Talent Nights; about his housemates and their many virtues; about how Muffy had come to visit in the dorm and had brought a platter of sausage rolls; about Cedric Diggory and how he was helping Harry find his way around the castle; about the exciting prospect of the first flying lesson.

"I've spoken to the mediwitch about you," Snape told Harry. "Madam Pomfrey. You'll like her. She's quite competent. She wants to have a look at you Monday before class."

"I'm fine," Harry complained.

"You're better, I grant you, but hardly fine. You're only just over a month past the privations of the Dursleys. Monday. Eight o'clock. Be there."

"OK, OK. I'll be there."

There was a brief, comfortable silence. In a moment, Harry spoke again. "Professor--" Harry asked, in that tone Snape recognized: the tone Harry used when he was attempting to talk Snape into something. Snape raised a brow. Harry grinned self-consciously. "I won't play games. There's something I'd like to ask you. Me and my friends--"

Snape frowned.

"--uh--my friends and I were talking, and some of us need to know more about wizarding things. Could you help us start a club?"

"A--club?" Snape mentally cringed at the thought of supervising a group of horrifyingly enthusiastic children. He cleared his throat. "What sort of--club?"

"A club for kids who are new to magic," Harry explained seriously. "We thought of calling ourselves 'The Outsiders,' or the 'Explorers,' or maybe 'The Newbloods.' We're going to study Professor Burbage's book, and our friends are going to teach us things they know."

Snape's mind raced to a comfortable conclusion. "Perhaps I can help--"

He strode to the fireplace and called out, "Charity Burbage."

A green face appeared in the fire.

"Severus?"

Harry's eyes opened wide. This he hadn't seen before. It was cool, but sort of creepy. The face was distorted, but the voice was certainly a woman's.

"Professor Burbage," Snape asked politely, "do you have a moment to step through to my quarters? I have a student here who might profit from your advice."

"Well--I suppose--" The face appeared confused, and then said, "Just let me--in a minute--"

The face disappeared. Snape told Harry. "I believe she was out rather late last night. Perhaps we awakened her."

Rather scandalised, Harry said, "It's four o'clock in the afternoon!"

"I heard that!" A witch stepped through the fire and emerged into the sitting room, brushing herself off. Harry thought she must nearly as

old as Professor Snape. She had a rather nice face: roundish cheeks and snapping brown eyes. Her dark blonde hair was done up in intertwined braids. Harry thought it looked interesting, and sort of like the styles he had seen in books about ancient witches. She gave Harry a bemused nod. With a touch of irritation she told Snape, "I've been up since ten, for your information. I was engrossed in a book."

"So sorry to impugn your honour. Professor Burbage, allow me to introduce Harry Potter. I am his wizarding proxy, and Mr Potter has some questions that relate to your book."

The witch's eyes brightened. "My book?" She asked Harry, "Did you read it?"

"Yes, Professor. I liked it a lot. I'm happy to meet you."

"Oh--yes--happy to meet you, too." She put out her hand and shook Harry's vigorously. "So you're Harry Potter!"

"I believe he knows that," Snape grunted. "Would you take some tea with us?" He motioned her to a chair, and Harry to another. "Muffy! Tea for three! Master Harry is with me!"

The little house elf popped in, eyes huge and soulful, carrying a tray. "Master Harry! I has little treacle tarts for you like you likes best! Blackberry scones, too--"

"Hullo, Muffy!" Harry called out. "This is brilliant! And Justin says thank you for the sausage rolls!"

"That's all, Muffy!" Snape interrupted. The elf popped away, and Snape continued. "Professor, Harry here was raised in the muggle world, and I bought your book for him, hoping it would be of use."

"And it was?" the witch asked anxiously. "There's not much interest in the subject."

Harry felt a little sorry for her. "Yes, it was, Professor! All my muggleborn friends want to read it, but since I only have the one copy,

we want to study it together. That's why I was asking Professor Snape here if he would sponsor a club for us."

Professor Burbage was more than a little surprised. She glanced at Snape, who shrugged.

"Much more in your line than mine."

Her brows knit in puzzlement. "You want to start a Muggle Studies club?"

"No, professor!" Harry told her earnestly. "We want to start a Wizard Studies club. There's so much we don't know. Some of the other students--not so much me, but other first years--well--they're having a hard time. If we understood more about the wizarding world, we wouldn't make so many mistakes. And some of my housemates want to join too, even if they're purebloods, and they could share what they know. We can't meet, though, unless a professor agrees to sponsor us. It would be brilliant if you did!"

Snape forbore to smile at Harry's artless flattery. It was hardly surprising that Charity's book had sold so poorly. The small number of muggleborn students would not make for much demand, even had they known about it. He studied the witch. She was heaping clotted cream on her scone, visibly pleased and excited. It must be an agreeable surprise to find someone so interested in a field that seemed ridiculously obvious and unnecessary to the majority of purebloods--and even to most halfbloods. He congratulated himself on his cunning. Harry would have his club and Snape would not have to lift a finger.

A half-hour passed with finger sandwiches, scones, tarts, and plans for the new club. Charity said she would speak to the Headmaster directly.

"He'll be thrilled, I'm sure. Children from different backgrounds coming together like this! What a splendid idea!"

Snape cynically wondered if Albus would think it splendid. For all his talk, Snape did not see that Albus had done much to improve

relations among the houses or among students of "different backgrounds." He certainly had not expended much influence to rid Muggle Studies of the albatross of a textbook that Charity constantly complained of. However, he might find it difficult to refuse her proposed club. It would be interesting to see if Harry managed to make a success of it.

Harry wiped his fingers hastily. Professor Burbage wanted to shake hands again, and then she bustled off, looking much happier than she had when she first arrived. He drank his tea, enjoying the lingering taste of the treacle tart on the back of his tongue.

Snape studied him thoughtfully, and then asked, "Are you thinking about asking Draco to join your little group?"

Harry looked up quickly, with a tiny smirk on his face. Snape reminded himself that Harry was not as simple as he sometimes appeared to be.

"Why not?" Harry asked. "I'm sure he could tell us a lot. Draco likes to show off what he knows. He's worse than Ernie that way. I'm going to ask Neville, too. I like him, and he hasn't hit it off all that well with the Gryffindor boys. He knows a lot about magical plants and wizarding remedies. Susan says we should have treats. I think that's a good idea. What do you think?"

"I think tea will prove irresistibly attractive to the masses. If you don't take care, you'll have the entire first year in attendance. Now, tell me more about your Defense class."

N.A. Ive been a bit taken aback by some reviewers' acid comments about "Mary-Sue" Sally Perks. How can she be a Mary-Sue? She's certainly not brilliant or exceptionally magically gifted. However, she is indeed very pretty. I am attempting, as you may notice, to use that in this chapter in thinking about Hermione Granger's first year problems. Emma Watson in the films, though she is spirited and charming, has always been, in my opinion, pretty in a way that Hermione never was, or at least was not until she grew into her looks (and had a bit of magical orthodontia) a few years later.

My point is that a rather ordinary girl with normal social skills and better-than-average looks, is going to have an easier time than a very brilliant girl with very average (or somewhat odd) looks and poor social skills. It's human nature. Since canon has Sally-Anne Perks disappearing from Hogwarts sometime in the next few years, I intend to make use of that, too. Is magic the only gift worth having? I think that's a question worth posing. I pose it to myself, along with the eternal "Would I want to go to Hogwarts?" or more uneasily, "Would I want my child to go to Hogwarts?" My answers generally are no, yeah (maybe), and certainly not.

I have to remember that if I take my eleven-year-old self, as I was (and I was no better looking or socially well-adjusted than Hermione at that age), and drop myself into Hogwarts, I'm not going as Harry Potter's new best friend. I will be alone, far from friends and family, among a lot of very parochial people who know each other very, very well, and me not at all. They will despise my background, while knowing next to nothing about it. There will be nothing familiar to soften the difficulties either: no music today and no prospect of any tomorrow (no piano at Hogwarts to my knowledge), no art, no dramatics, and only a few other students from a similar background who may or may not share an interest in the books I like best.

In fact, I experienced something parallel to it about that time in my real life when I moved from Chicago where I attended a progressive school for the gifted, and two months later found myself going to a somewhat less progressive institution in a tiny rural town in Kentucky. At first, I had trouble even understanding what was being said to me (even by the teacher in the course of spelling tests!) The parents of classmates I was introduced to would squint at me in a puzzled way, wondering out loud "who I was kin to." There was much "good-natured funnin'" about "Yankees" and "furriners." I lived there for years and never penetrated more than the outer shells of social life. How well I did in school, the awards I won--even the offices I held--were all completely irrelevant. I was not one of them, and I never could be. I am not saying that that town in Kentucky was a terrible place or that I was superior to the people there. What I am saying is that it's really, really hard to be dropped without any orientation into an alien culture, and sometimes one never does fit in. It's not

impossible. If I'd been a good football player, they might well have taken me to their hearts!

Chapter 25

Draco grabbed Harry right after breakfast on Sunday, partly wanting to know how Harry liked the "duffers" in Hufflepuff, but mostly, of course, to talk about himself. He gave a nod to the Hufflepuff table as a whole, his eyes sliding away from Justin.

"Let's go outside," he said, pulling Harry along. "Mother sent me a box of Chapeaux. She said I ought to share it with you."

The school seemed thinly populated that morning as they made their way down the long staircases. Draco described the glory of the Slytherin Common Room in some detail, and told Harry how his arrival had entirely disrupted politics-as-usual within the house.

"The second years are not really from the best families, and there aren't many third years. I'll have every opportunity to establish myself in the house over the next few years. Zabini would be my only competition for prefect, but his father is dead, and his mother will likely cause another scandal before then. Professor Snape likes me anyway, and it's the Head of House who chooses the prefects. The Headmaster chooses Head Boy, of course, so Father told me not to expect it or worry about it, but it's important that I be first within my own house, especially now that you're in Hufflepuff and I have no real competition within Slytherin."

His father had told him not to repeat the rest of the letter, but Draco was only eleven, after all.

"Father said it was probably for the best that we weren't in the same house. With your fame, it was likely you would dominate your year in whichever house you were in. With you in Hufflepuff, and me in Slytherin, that's two houses we can control together. That's half of our year! Pretty good for first years, I'd say."

"I really hadn't thought about controlling anybody. Hufflepuff is nice. We have a third year looking after us, and there are lots of organized activities. We have a Study Night, and later Professor Sprout says we'll have a Talent Night"

"Yes, yes, all very nice, I daresay. The fact remains that in a few years we can run the school as we like. The Ravenclaws don't seem to have any leaders, and the Gryffindors are divided."

"It's too bad that the other Gryffindors aren't more friendly with Neville."

"Longbottom's all right. Decent manners, if a bit quiet. I sat with him in Herbology and he seems to know what he's about."

In fact, Draco had been very impressed by Neville's knowledge in Herbology, and had immediately grasped that he would do well in that class with Neville as a partner.

He had more to say about the subject. "Those Gryffindor girls are nothing but pretty fools. Thomas and Finnegan sit together, and Weasley and Smith are thick as thieves." He burst out laughing at his own wit. "Thick as thieves!" he crowed. "At least Weasley will do for the 'thick' bit. What a buffoon."

"He's not that bad. Smith is a prat, though."

They rambled out, and by mutual consent found their way back to the lake. A cool, stiff breeze brushed the water into choppy ripples. Draco opened his bag and revealed a ribbon-tied box. Mystified, Harry wondered what was inside. The word Draco had used meant nothing to him.

The smell of expensive, delicate pastries floated out enticingly. Inside the box, in prim ranks, were conical confections. Draco thrust the box at him.

"Help yourself."

Harry picked one up, and sniffed experimentally. The outside was a coating of smooth, dark chocolate with ribbons of green and pink buttercream. Draco had his and was already taking a bite. Deciding that anything coated in chocolate must be edible, Harry nibbled at the pointed top.

"Umm!"

Just under the chocolate coating was a layer of marzipan, rich and fragrant with almonds. Inside that layer was a filling of raspberry mousse. Harry caught the sweet, creamy filling on his tongue, and swallowed it reverently.

"What did you call this?"

"It's a Chapeau," Draco informed him. "A Witch's Hat." He stuffed the rest of his own in his mouth. "Mother gets them from Paris. Sublime, aren't they?"

"Ummhmmm," Harry agreed. After a moment, he took a deep satisfied breath, and asked, "Why does it have raspberry filling?"

Draco snickered. "Father says it's the witch's brain--delightful but entirely full of air. Mother thumps him when he says that."

Harry laughed. "They're super. It's nice of your mother to think of me." He tried to think what Professor Burbage's book said about this sort of situation. "I suppose I should owl her a thank you."

"We'll eat a few more, and make it worth your while."

They sprawled out under a beech tree, and finished half the box between them. Draco got up and skipped stones across the lake. Harry leaned back against the tree, feeling blissful. Perhaps this was the time...

"Draco--"

A stone skipped--once--twice--and disappeared under the shining surface of the lake.

"What?"

"You remember how your father wanted a class in wizarding customs?"

"Yes--that idea of his that Dumbledore keeps scotching."

"The other day some of us were talking, and we thought that if we can't have a class, maybe we could have a club."

Draco scowled, disappointed in his next throw. "What club?"

"Listen! A wizarding world club for all of us raised muggle. We could learn about manners and things like--like Chapeau thingies and manners and all that. Maybe some history too, since Binns is useless."

"Good idea. Teach the mu---muggleborn how to behave. Not that you need that sort of thing, but it would be something for the rest. Dumbledore will never hear of it, I daresay."

"No! We've got a good chance. I asked Professor Snape if he would be in charge, but he called Professor Burbage to do it instead, and she was quite excited about it. She seemed to think it was possible. So how about it?"

"How about what?" Draco threw himself on the grass and took another Chapeau, excavating carefully down to the creamy filling.

"The club! Are you in?"

"Are you serious? I'm no muggle!"

"I know! But Susan and Hannah and Ernie are in--as student assistants. They're going to help teach. I thought of you, since you know quite a lot. You had those etiquette lessons, didn't you? I reckon you must know as much as the Hufflepuffs."

Draco visibly swelled with indignation. "I should say so! Ernie MacMillan teach manners? The MacMillans are grubbing shopkeepers who got lucky! Abbot is a halfblood, you know. The Bones family is all right, I suppose, but--"

"You see? We really need you!" Feeling very cunning, Harry pointed out, "And wouldn't your father be pleased, if you managed to carry out his idea? Susan said there'd be treats, too."

"Oh! Well. Yes. Father would be pleased. I should imagine he would be very--proud," Draco's eyes glowed. "Even half the purebloods these days don't seem to know the old ways. It's a disgrace. We could talk about the real holidays, like Beltane and Samhain, and maybe even teach the old dances."

"Dances?" Harry asked, faintly horrified.

"Wizards dancing--the real, old dances--are the best! They have special magical meanings, you know--not like muggles jumping up and down like savages. No, really, Harry! It's quite fun, really. And Father says it's good for one's magical core." He leaned back, thinking. "Don't tell anyone I'm involved. If Dumbledore hears that the Malfoys have anything to do with it, he'll never allow it. He hates us. I'll owl Father and tell him, but I'll say that you're the one doing the talking. Once the club is approved and everything is scheduled, Dumbledore won't be able to stop us without looking like a spoilsport."

"That's very Slytherin of you," Harry congratulated him.

Draco was pleased. "Yes, it is, isn't it?"

Harry took another pastry, and amused himself with eating it layer by layer. "Of course, in a club like that, you're going to have to spend time with halfbloods like me and muggleborn kids like Justin--and Hermione Granger."

Seeing Draco's face clouding, he hurried on. "--And you're going to have to be nice to them and talk to them. If you don't talk to them, how can they learn? It's not fair to say people are ignorant, without giving them a chance to find out about things they need to know. I expect they'll really look up to people who help them out from the first."

Draco considered this. A little uncertainly, he said, "I'll owl Father. He'd want to know about this." He smirked. "What a prank, teaching the muggleborn proper ways right under Dumbledore's big nose! All right. If Father approves, I'm in. But that doesn't mean I'm going to be that Granger's best friend!"

"I'm not asking you to marry her, Draco," Harry said soothingly. "Just share what you know and knock them all on their arses with the grand Malfoy manner. Show the rest how it's done!"

"I could do that," Draco agreed, liking the idea of himself as a respected leader. "Marry Granger!" he snorted, licking chocolate from his fingers.

Professor Burbage sent word that the wizarding studies club seemed to be a go. She talked with Professor McGonagall, who was outspoken in her support for the group.

"After all," she said in the staff room. "So many of the wizardborn have had a chance to get to know one another. It seems very sensible to give a chance to the students new to our world to become acquainted. It was young Harry Potter's idea, you know. It's a very good thing, and it's open to all the first years. The wizardborn will teach the muggleborn about the wizarding world and vice versa. A very sound idea, and certainly one whose time has come."

Dumbledore expressed some reservations about pureblood prejudice, but he found that by and large the staff supported the new club. Quirrell did not express an opinion, and Binns seemed baffled by it all, but otherwise it was well-received.

The Wizarding World Explorers Club was approved, with Professor Charity Burbage as the staff advisor. The students would be informed within the next few days. The club would meet on Sunday afternoons in an unused classroom near the stairs to the Astronomy Tower.

Meanwhile, flying lessons had been announced, and happy, happy Thursday was here at last. Hufflepuff and Gryffindor would be learning together.

Hufflepuff House was astir. In the Sett, older students wished their first-year classmates well. Cedric told Justin, Harry, and Sally they would be fine.

"Madam Hooch knows what she's doing," he assured them. "Listen to her, and don't lose your heads. You three," he said to Ernie, Hannah, and Susan. "Keep an eye on your partners." He turned to the other three first-years, and told Justin to stick with Ernie, Sally with Hannah, and Harry with Susan. "You'll have someone used to flying with you, that way. And you, Harry," he smiled. "I heard your father was quite the quidditch player in his day. There's a trophy with his name on it, here at the school. I shouldn't wonder if you had a bit of his talent!"

Harry beamed, glad to hear praise of his father, hoping that he really had inherited something besides jewels and a trunk.

The six first-year Badgers hurried down the front steps, heading to the smooth flat lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the forbidden forest. The Gryffindors were already there, and so were thirteen broomsticks lying in three neat lines on the ground. Harry gave Neville a smile and a wave. Neville returned the wave half-heartedly, looking rather sick. Zach Smith and Ron Weasley were joking about the brooms, roughhousing a bit. Coming closer, Harry could see these brooms were certainly not up to the standards of Malfoy Manor. They were old and the twigs stuck out at odd angles.

Their teacher, Madam Hooch, arrived. She had short, gray hair, and yellow eyes like a hawk. Harry decided that he liked her eyes.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

There was some brief shoving, as Zach and Ron claimed the best of the brooms. The rest of them made do with what was left.

Neville stood by Harry, and confided, "I've never been on a broomstick. Gran wouldn't let me near one."

"A lot of people here have never been on one. I've only gone flying twice, and I don't have a broom of my own. Here--Susan," he asked the red-haired girl. "Would you watch Neville instead of me? I've at least flown, and he hasn't at all."

Susan placed herself between the two boys, looking very business-like. "I'll watch both of you. Neville, the most important thing is to stay calm. You are in charge of--" she pointed commandingly "--that broomstick. It is not in charge of you!"

At the front of the lines, Madam Hooch called out, "Stick out your right hand over your broom, and say 'Up!'"

Not surprisingly, Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once. A good half of the brooms remained on the ground. One end of Justin's reared up tentatively, and then thumped back. Sally's rose very, very slowly, making the rest of the students giggle. Neville's hadn't moved at all. After a few more attempts, and some outright grabs, each student had a broom--of a sort--while Madam Hooch showed them how to mount without sliding off the end. She marched up and down the line, correcting their grips. There was some grumbling from more experienced flyers, but she insisted everyone do it her way or give up their broom.

"Now, when I blow my whistle," she said, "you kick off from the ground hard. Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle--three--two--"

Neville was so nervous that he nearly pushed off before the whistle had sounded. Susan's warning hiss stopped him. Unfortunately, it stopped him so effectively that he froze, while the rest of the class rose into the air: some smoothly, like Harry, and some in little jerks and starts, like Justin. Sally soared in a high, graceful arc, uttering a little shriek.

"Get back down here, girl!" Madam Hooch shouted. Sally, alarmed, leaned forward at once, and the broom zoomed toward the ground, Hannah, luckily, darted up beside her, and caught at the broomstick, slowing Sally's descent.

"Lean forward just a tiny bit," Hannah called. "Lean like me!"

Sally had no trouble matching Hannah's posture exactly, and the two girls touched ground together. Hannah gave Sally's shoulder a comforting pat.

Madam Hooch shouted out, "The brooms respond to the slightest motion. Small corrections, class! Small corrections!"

Harry glanced and saw that Ernie and Justin were successfully up and down together. Justin was telling Ernie about how it reminded him of his father's Lamborghini.

"I don't know much about Italian brooms," Ernie replied, very interested. They moved away, as Justin explained about muggle sports cars and what fun they were.

Between them, Susan and Harry helped Neville ease up slowly. Susan gave Neville a bright smile and tossed her red hair.

"You see?" she demanded. "It's easy!"

She leaned forward, very slightly, and Neville anxiously followed suit. Harry joined them, very smoothly, and Madam Hooch saw him and gave him a sharp nod of satisfaction.

"Very nice," she said. "You lot are shaping up a treat."

Next, she wanted them to fly in circles no higher than ten feet above the ground, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. It was something like the first lesson at Malfoy Manor, though not nearly so imaginative and exciting. In between Susan and Hannah, Harry flew decorously, minding his grip and his speed. The Gryffindors were pushing the limits of Madam Hooch's patience, whining that they already knew all this, and why did they have to slow down for the babies?

"Belt up, over there," Madam Hooch boomed. "Straighten your line. You! Finnegan, is it? You're not riding a donkey!"

That made them all laugh--Seamus as loud as the rest. Flying could never be boring, though Harry agreed with the Gryffindors that the more experienced flyers should be trained in a different group.

He was congratulating himself on his own expertise, when his broom began shaking violently.

"Whoa!" he complained, holding tight.

"Don't play the fool, Potter!" Madam Hooch growled.

"I'm not doing this!" Harry objected. "There's something wrong with the broom!"

Madam Hooch soared over to him, muttering, "Ancient rubbish. If the Governors don't cough up new brooms next year, we might as well give over altogether!"

"Quirinius?" Minerva saw Quirrell looking out the window at the first-years at their flying lesson. She smiled a little to herself at the sight of Harry, speeding along with his classmates. Looking again at Quirrell, she scowled. The man's lips were moving, but no sound was audible. What is he at?

"Quirinius!" she called, "Don't you have the third years now?"

Was he casting a spell? The lips stopped their movement, and twisted in what was clearly rage. Quirrell had no choice but turn and speak to her, his expression now the usual one of timorous apprehension.

"Y-y-yes, M-M-Minerv-va. B-b-beautiful d-d-day, isnt it?"

"I daresay," she returned curtly. "Don't be late. It sends entirely the wrong message!"

She swept away, needing to get to her own class.

The broom's flight smoothed out quite suddenly. Harry grimaced apologetically at Madam Hooch.

"It seems fine now."

"Not your fault, Potter. The underhatch is a disgrace. It's a miracle you can steer at all. You'll need to keep on top of things, though, with an unreliable broom like that." She veered off, frowning at Dean Thomas.

Next, they were to practice their ascents and descents, marking their height with the castle wall. Lavender Brown's angle was too steep, and the girl slid backwards, landing on her bottom with a squeal. Zach and Ron roared with laughter, forgetting to pay attention to what they were doing. Their brooms collided, and both were sent spinning wildly in opposite directions. There was more laughter. Ron's ears were brilliant pink with embarrassment, and he scowled at Harry, not liking to be made fun of.

Harry was too busy helping Neville avoid Zach to pay much attention. His broom began vibrating again, yawing from side to side like an angry snake.

"Harry!" Ernie called out, "Hold fast!"

He broke out of line, followed by Justin. By the time he reached Harry, the vibrating had completely stopped.

"I'm all right," Harry assured them. "Madam Hooch said this broom was rubbish. It's fun all the same."

"In no hurry to get to class, Quirrell, are we?" Snape sneered, suddenly looming out of the shadows. "And last year you were so eager for the Defense position. Your ardour seems--cooled."

Even with the addition of the turban, Snape was far taller than Quirrell, and made the most of his height to intimidate.

"If you can't be bothered to teach, there are those--more experienced, perhaps more qualified--who can easily replace you."

"S-s-sorry, S-S-Severus. Just watching the children."

"Watch them in the Defense Classroom, then!"

Snape turned smartly on his heel, and strode away to the dungeons.

Harry laughed off his friends' concerns. Now they were doing serpentine turns, and it was the most fun of all. Everyone seemed more at ease now, and they picked up speed on the curves of the figure eights. Neville still seemed anxious, but was doing well enough. Sally was picking it up quickly, and appeared to be enjoying herself. Justin, too, was having a good time, pestering Madam Hooch with questions that seemed related to horseback riding. He wanted to know what one was supposed to do with one's feet. Should the heels be depressed? What boots ought one to wear? Was there special clothing for flying?

"Didn't matter--dragonhide--yes---" were the answers rapped out rather absently by Madam Hooch, who was too busy watching to listen.

Harry thought that Justin's questions were good ones, and perhaps in one of their club sessions they could learn all about the ins and outs of flying. Madam Hooch might consent to be a guest speaker, if Professor Burbage asked her. Flying and quidditch were very important to the wizarding world.

Out of the blue, his broom bucked, nearly spilling him to the ground. He clenched his teeth and pulled up quickly. Ron Weasley was just passing from the other direction, and there was a cry of alarm. Glancing back, he saw that the red-haired boy's broom was pitching violently. A jerk, and the boy was flung off bodily, clinging only by his hands, as the broom roared toward the ground. Ron screamed, blue eyes distended.

"Arghhh! Help me!"

Harry banked tightly. Pushing his own broom to the highest speed, he shot after Ron, hand out. With a flick, he nosed the broom up as Madam Hooch flew in from the other side. She reached over and caught the broom handle, while Harry tightened his own grip. Together, they slowed and made a soft descent. Ron dropped the last three feet, curling up on his side, breathing heavily. Madam Hooch slipped over her own broom, jumping lightly to the ground.

"Are you all right? Let's see your hands." She called out to Harry, "Good catch, Potter!"

Zach Smith zoomed up beside Harry, glaring. "Think you're smart, Potter! You probably knocked Ron off his broom, and now you act like some sort of hero, saving him!"

Harry glared in his turn. "I did not knock him off his broom, Smith!"

Justin flew up and circled them both slowly. "Of course you didn't, Harry. I saw it myself. Weasley lost control and would have crashed if you hadn't caught him. Fair is fair," he told Smith. "I didn't see you helping your friend."

Zach sneered, and zoomed away. Harry rolled his eyes at Justin, who snorted a laugh.

"There's a nasty piece of work."

"All right!" Madam Hooch called, "That's all for today! Get down, you lot! Be here at the same time next Thursday. And if you don't want to

spoil your hands," she declared, shooting a dark look at Parvati Patil, "you'll wear flying gloves!"

Ron was still sitting on the ground, looking winded. Harry walked past with Justin, when the red-haired boy called out, "Potter!"

Harry turned, bracing himself for more accusations.

"Thanks," Ron muttered.

Harry gave him a grin and a quick nod.

Quirrell followed Dumbledore to the Headmaster's Office, fuming. The old fool wanted Quirrell's ideas for the new Wizarding World Club, and had been disappointed not to have received them earlier. Clearly, dawdling in a public area was an invitation for prim rebukes from McGonagall, not-so-veiled threats from a jealous, resentful Snape--and tea with the Headmaster. In the future, observing Harry Potter must be undertaken with more discretion.

While the others trailed away from the flying lesson, Madam Hooch kept Harry back for a word. "Not half bad, Potter," she approved. "You seem to be a natural on a broom."

"Thanks, Madam Hooch!"

Harry was warmed by the kind words. Flying really was the best thing in the world. Draco was absolutely right.

And speaking of Draco--here he was himself, on his way to the Slytherin/Ravenclaw flying lesson. He was flanked by Vincent and Gregory, regaling them with a story about a narrow escape from a muggle helicopter.

Further back, behind the Ravenclaws, was Hermione Granger. Her small face, framed by her bushy brown hair, looked lonely and scared.

Harry felt badly for her. It didn't look as if the Ravenclaws were partnered up the way the Hufflepuffs had been. He moved over to speak to Draco.

"Harry!" the blond boy called. "How was it?"

"A lot of fun. The brooms are rubbish, though. Watch out for them." He lowered his voice. "It went as well as it did because the experienced flyers looked after the first-timers--the way you and your father looked after me at Malfoy Manor. It made all the difference today, you know."

Draco smirked with satisfaction.

"--And so," Harry went on, "I'd really appreciate it if you'd look after Hermione. She's going to be in our club--at least if the Headmaster is persuaded it's a good idea. This is a chance to show leadership," he pointed out virtuously. "I would have done it if she'd been in our group, but you're the most experienced after all, and I reckon you'd do the best job anyway."

Draco grimaced, torn between basking in the praise and accepting the care and tutelage of a--of a--of a muggleborn.

Harry gazed at him, green eyes a-glow. "Draco," he intoned, very seriously. "WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY."

The words hung in the air. Draco did his best not to show how impressed he was with Harry's remarkable eloquence. The world seemed to shift on its axis...

"Oh, very well," Draco surrendered. "But she had better not talk me to death!"

Sulkily, he muttered a dismissal back at his bodyguards, and sloped off to speak to Hermione. Harry watched, and saw the girl perk up and begin chatting as she trotted after Draco to the waiting brooms. Harry grinned, noticing that Draco was trying to walk a little faster to escape the torrent of questions.

Chapter 26

There was Dudley Dursley, and then there was Piers Polkiss. Now added to the rogues' gallery was Zach Smith. Harry hadn't known he could dislike a boy nearly as much as he disliked his cousin. Smith seemed offended by Harry Potter's very presence, and just wouldn't let it alone.

The boy's hostility made Charms, Astronomy, and Defense harder than they already were. In Defense, especially, Smith could be trusted to snigger whenever Harry was called on. It was terribly annoying, and the Hufflepuffs had taken to ignoring most the Gryffindors altogether. They sat in a tight little group, with Neville as their only point of contact. Possibly without Smith, the situation would not have been so bad, because now and then Harry could hear Finnegan telling Smith to "belt up," to Thomas' muttered agreement. Once he even heard Weasley saying, "--but he's not so bad!" as he came into the Charms classroom. All the Gryffindor boys stopped talking and the girls giggled, which made Harry think they were speaking of Harry himself. Neville was silent in class, and Harry once again wished the boy had been a Hufflepuff. Hufflepuff House was great.

"Why does Smith dislike me so much?" Harry asked Neville in a whisper, as they left the Defense classroom.

Neville ducked his head, glancing warily ahead at Zach Smith, and whispered back, "The Smiths are a very proud family. Mr Smith--Zach's father--called on Gran once. He was--Gran said herself--'haughty.' He looked at me like I was a bug. They claim descent from Helga Hufflepuff herself, you know. From what I've heard, Zach thought he was going to be the most important first-year, and he had a rude shock when he saw how people look up to you--and to Draco too, a bit. And then Hermione Granger is such a smart girl. I don't think he thought there was going to be this kind of competition at school. It makes him really----well--I don't know--really put out. He was going on about you in the Gryffindor Common Room all the time, but the older Gryffs are already sick of it. So now it's just in our dorm." Very softly, he added, "I'm pretty sick of it, too."

Before dinner on Saturday, Professor Dumbledore announced the formation of a new club, open to all first-years: The Wizarding World Explorers. They would meet in the unused classroom across the hall from Muggle Studies. The meeting would begin at three o'clock this very Sunday afternoon, followed by a special tea.

It had taken quite a bit of leaning on the Headmaster to make the club a reality. Dumbledore had been very concerned that the impressionable first years would be indoctrinated in the worst prejudices of the pureblood extremists. That concern was thoroughly--and very innocently--countered by Charity Burbage, who was astonished and a little hurt that their Headmaster would imagine she would permit anything so terrible to happen. She would be there the entire time, she assured the staff, and would observe the students carefully. There would be no bullying and no hateful sneers directed at students because of their families. Really, that was all so foolish, anyway. She wished she could take the children to New Zealand to show them how little other wizarding cultures cared about who one's grandmother was!

Dumbledore found himself with little he could say. All four Heads of Houses very much supported the new club. The staff as a whole favored the idea. If applied to, the Governors almost certainly would come down on the side of the club. In the end, Dumbledore had smiled and acceded, with the condition that the club's existence was provisional only. They would see, this term, whether it was a good thing--or not.

Snape watched the children for their reactions. To his relief, Slytherin House was well prepared for the announcement. Draco looked very superior. He had presented the club as a good thing to his housemates: a chance to set the muggleborn straight about how things were done by witches and wizards. Then, too, they could all learn much that would be useful if they worked in the Ministry someday as Aurors or Obliviators. And there would be tea. Besides Draco, Crabbe and Goyle were certain to represent the house. There was considerable, whispered debate among the other children, and

Snape had noted an increase in owl traffic over the last week, as the new Slytherins wrote home to gauge parental support for such a radical notion as socializing with the lesser orders.

The Ravenclaws, by and large, looked rather uninterested. Snape knew of only two muggleborns there: the insufferable Granger girl and a rather affectless boy named Terence Boot. The two did not sit together or interact, since Boot seemed to get on well enough with the Ravenclaw boys. As to the girl--it seemed to Snape that the other girls treated the news with studied disdain, as if something that would include Granger could not possibly be any concern of theirs.

There was dissension in Gryffindor House. He believed that Harry had recruited the Longbottom boy for his little club, but that young Smith was exerting some pressure on his other roommates to keep their distance. How long that situation would last was debatable. The mention of a "special tea" brought a wistful look to the eyes of Ron Weasley. Thomas and Finnegan were talking to each other quietly, clearly plotting mutiny. If Smith were the leader he evidently fancied himself to be, he would learn that keeping potential followers from something attractive--without making an equally attractive counteroffer--was not the way to build loyalty. The Dark Lord had been a master--at least in the beginning--of giving his followers what they thought they most wanted.

Hufflepuff House, of course, was the heart of the new club, and all the first years were looking excited and pleased. Snape sought out the dark hair surrounded by red and blonde. Green eyes instinctively glanced his way. Harry smiled at him, very pleased with himself. So he should be.

The only reservations Snape himself had about the club was the second-floor right hand corridor location, considering that the Headmaster had threatened death to anyone who wandered up to the floor directly above.

"It's going to be such fun!" Hannah said, going over the list with Susan. "We need more girls, though."

"If they hear enough good things, maybe the Slytherin girls will come another time. Parvati won't come because her sister can't stand Hermione Granger, and Lavender won't come unless Parvati comes."

"That's just silly," Sally sniffed.

"Harry!" Hannah hissed at him. "Tell Draco to make Pansy come! We need more girls!"

"The way I see it," Ernie informed Justin, "it's no great loss if the Ravenclaws think they're too clever to need a club. We'll have made a real contribution to the school, and that's what counts."

Harry was calculating the club enrollment. There were the six Hufflepuffs. There was Hermione. Justin had spoken to Terry Boot in Herbology and gotten a promise to show. Neville and Draco Harry had spoken to himself, and they were solid. Draco would bring Crabbe and Goyle--well-- because he would. Besides, the two big lads might have interesting things to share about farming and sheep raising the wizarding way. Harry knew he ought not to discount something so important.

That made twelve, which was plenty to have a good time. Justin thought that Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas might come. They had never given Harry a particularly hard time, and were welcome enough, if they chose to make an appearance.

Susan was whispering, "Millicent Bulstrode won't come. Her mother was a halfblood, you know, and probably she's afraid that people will think she needs things explained to her. And I don't know about Daphne Greengrass. She and Pansy bickered whenever we went to Madam Hornpipe's for our dancing lessons."

"Why does everybody think we're going to be dancing?" Harry growled.

The large and high-ceilinged room set aside for the Wizing World Explorers was part of the original Hogwarts created by the Founders, and had been many things over the millennium of its existence. In its first incarnation, long before the days of the Hogwarts Express, it had had been a sleeping room for aspiring young witches as they came from all over the British Isles hoping to be found suitable for tuition by one of the Four. In later centuries it had witnessed the teaching of Latin, of Astrology, of Aeromancy, of Divination, of Embroidery (oh, yes, indeed!), and of Music.

For over three hundred years it had been the Transfiguration classroom, but that ended in the seventeenth century when the space was needed for families fleeing the Witch-Hunts. The Transfiguration master had found another, smaller room, and when the refugees went home, or went abroad, or decided to take a cottage in Hogsmeade, the now-empty room became a *salle d'armes*, and the stone walls echoed to the sound of clashing swords.

Around the turn of the 19th century, the stone floor was replaced by one of elaborate wood parquet, suitable for dancing. The room became a small ballroom, as a compliment by a fawning Headmaster to King George III's sixth son, Octavius, whose early accidental magic caused such a to-do in the wizing world in 1783. Never since the Statute of Secrecy was established had magic been closer to complete exposure. Extreme measures were taken. The boys' parents, King George III and Queen Charlotte, grieved deeply, convinced by the Obliviators that their son had died. The young prince was something of a celebrity during his Hogwarts years, and special, very select balls were held to introduce him to the children of the wizing elite. Young Octavius Prince loved the wizing world so much that he never dreamed of leaving it, and within a generation or two, the family first lost all interest, and then all memory of its royal descent. The dance floor, however, remained.

The room paused for breath in mid-century, as the mores of the Victorian era trickled through the castle stones and the students grew graver. Dust collected on the shining parquet floor. When the occasional ball was held, it was held in the Great Hall. From time to time the high-ceilinged chamber was the scene of duels and trysts,

and in 1943 of a private meeting of a charismatic young Slytherin with a number of admirers from his own house--and other houses as well.

On this Sunday afternoon in 1991, it was at its best and brightest, scrubbed clean and polished by the hands of Hogwarts elves. The Hufflepuffs went early, to be certain that everything was in readiness. To their delight, the room was not set up as a classroom. Instead of rows of desks and chairs, there were comfortable sofas and armchairs arranged in a U in front of a handsome fireplace. A great deal of the room was left open, and in the back was a well-appointed long table where the tea would be set out. It was bright with silver candelabra and a gorgeously embroidered table runner. A huge silver epergne in the center held a profusion of late summer flowers.

"This is very nice," Ernie nodded, admiring the three glittering chandeliers and the mirrored walls. "Quite satisfactory." Justin walked over to admire a huge painting of a wizards' ball in progress.

Sally surprised them with an impromptu little dance: a *ronde de jambe*, a *chassé*, a *pas de chat*, two more *chassés*, and a *grand jeté*.

"That was lovely!" Hannah gasped. The figures in the painting pointed and applauded: a faint clatter of hands and fans and wands tapping approval

"Nice floor," Sally remarked, as they all stared. She began turning in a series of quick *fouettés*, her working leg snapping in and out as she whirled. She then dropped a most beautiful curtsy to the dancers in the painting. There was another rustle of approval.

"Is that muggle dancing?" Susan asked excitedly. "Can you do that, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, astonished that anyone would think it possible, astonished that anyone could do it. He had never seen anyone dance, except briefly on the telly, but he knew from the remarks in primary school that proper blokes were supposed to despise it. It was just as well that he said nothing of the sort, because Justin came from a very cultured home, and knew better.

Justin explained. "That's ballet dancing. It takes a lot of special training. My little sister takes lessons, but she's nowhere as good as Sally. My mother loves ballet. We go to see The Nutcracker at Covent Garden every Christmas."

This statement required more explanation, touching on muggle forms of entertainment, and theatres, and music, and how one could possibly tell a story simply through music and dance. Sally's respect for Justin had obviously just grown exponentially.

It was all news to Harry. The one concert he had attended with Snape was his only experience of live music. That summer night's performance had been grand and beautiful, but it had been something very much outside his normal experience.

Sally told the others how the students at the Royal Ballet School took part in The Nutcracker, and that it was the dream of her life to be one of them. This time, her talk about dancing was listened to with a little more interest.

"You should dance for Talent Night," Hannah urged her.

Sally shook her head. "I'd need music, and muggle electronics don't work here at Hogwarts."

Ernie pondered the problem. "There are music boxes, of course. You could learn to charm something to play a tune for you." Seeing that Sally was rather intimidated by the idea, he then said, "Or you could ask one of the students who plays an instrument to play for you. That seventh year prefect, Wintringham, plays the lute very well. I'm sure he'd help you out. Or there's Merton Graves in third year. He plays the cello, and his older sister Ambrosia plays the harp. She's in Ravenclaw, though."

Thus, there was a lively conversation already in progress as the other students arrived. Hermione Granger, unsurprisingly, was first. She came alone, carrying an armload of books. Harry came over to speak to her, with Sally at his heels.

"Hullo, Hermione!" she called out cheerfully. "I'm so glad you're here! We've been talking about music and dance. Do you play?"

"Play?" Hermione had been prepared for all sorts of topics, but not that particular one. "Play music?"

Sally gave her an encouraging look.

"Uh--well--I play the piano, actually," Hermione admitted. "But I don't know if--"

Her tentative answer was drowned out by the loud voices of a group of boys. Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnegan, and Terry Boot had met on the way and were deep in a debate about the virtues of football versus quidditch. Neville was following behind them, looking nervous. He was holding a glass ball the size of a marble that was glowing red. There were more greetings, and much shaking of hands. Most of the girls broke off to admire the decorations at the serving table.

Harry left Sally to it. She had obviously decided to partner up with Hermione for the duration of the club meeting, and was talking excitedly about music and the Hufflepuff Talent Night coming up next month, and did Ravenclaw do anything like that?

He joined the other boys, and heard the end of a sentence.

"--and Gran knows I forget things. It usually looks like its full of white smoke, but it gets like this if I've forgotten something."

"What did you forget?" Terry asked.

"I don't know!" Neville wailed.

Professor Burbage arrived. She was wearing robes of lavender edged with purple velvet. Harry thought they looked nice with her dark blonde hair. It was done up in even more braids than usual, all intricately woven into a knot at the back of her head. She was wearing earrings of gold set with amethysts. She had nothing with her but a notebook with a pocket for a purple quill. She set that on the

seat of a chair a little to the side, and came over to speak to the students.

"Hello, fellow Explorers!" she called out. "I can see you've already found a lot to talk over!" She touched Harry gently on the arm. "I'm just going to sit back here. This is your show, and you don't want a teacher taking over. When all your friends come, I think you should welcome them, and decide together what you'd like to learn about. I have a few ideas, and I'll help you out if you like, but it would be best if the students were in charge." She gave him an encouraging smile, and turned to speak to Susan.

"But--" Harry managed, blushing.

Just then, the Slytherin contingent arrived, Draco swaggered in, flanked by his two taller companions. Harry came over to say hello and give him the thanks Draco was clearly expecting.

"It's going to be great," he told Draco. "Professor Burbage is here, but she wants to leave what we do up to us, for the most part. She wanted me to welcome everyone, if you can believe it. Is anyone else coming?"

Draco scowled. "Those wretched girls! I think they all wanted to come, but then they went completely mad. Pansy sniped at Millie about her muggle great-parents, and then Millie ran off crying, and Daphne told Pansy she was a beastly bully and had the manners of a troll. Pansy tried to jinx Daphne, and Daphne tried to jinx her back, and they've both somehow got antennae. I should have known it would all end in tears."

Harry laughed. "Susan and Hannah will be disappointed that more girls didn't come. All the more tea for us, I suppose."

Draco smirked, "True." He cast an appraising eye over the students. "A bit thin on the Ravenclaw side. Look here, Harry," he said, dropping his voice confidentially, "We need to gain control of the group from the beginning. Father says you've got to be prepared, or there's chaos and people get ideas and start squabbling. You make your speech, and then the first order of business is to select officers.

I've given some thought to that. We'll present them with a slate ready-made." To Harry's amazement, Draco pulled a sheet of parchment from his pocket. "Now, you ought to be president, as it's your idea. That's quite all right with me. However, you should spread the offices amongst the houses. I rather fancy being the vice-president. It sounds well, and there won't be much to do. We'll need a secretary." He glanced up at the attendees, narrowing his eyes. "It might not be a popular choice, but I think Hermione Granger should be secretary. No--hear me out, first." Expecting an argument, he pressed ahead with his reasons.

"Since this club is supposed to educate the muggleborn, we ought to have a muggleborn officer. Granger is a Ravenclaw and a muggleborn, and so politically it's really a very shrewd choice. I daresay she'll take very complete minutes. The teachers like Granger, I've noticed. They'll think we're being generous. She's not so bad, you know. She was quite touchingly grateful for my assistance at the flying lesson." He looked at Harry, awaiting a response.

Harry opened his mouth, and simply said, "Sounds good to me. But no way am I putting myself forward to be president."

"Of course not," Draco said with long-suffering patience. "I'll do that. Call on me first thing."

"All right, but what about the Gryffindors?"

"Well, we must give them something, I suppose. The club hasn't any funds, luckily. Everyone knows that Gryffindors are pitiful money managers. There's an old office they have in the Wizengamot--Serjeant-at-Arms. Back before there were Aurors all over the place, the Serjeant-at-Arms was responsible for chucking out troublemakers. There are even special hexes used. Now of course, it's just a sinecure for some pathetic old geezer. We could have a Serjeant-at-Arms of our own, though. It sounds just the thing for Gryffindor. What do you say to Longbottom?"

"I think we should ask him first." Harry said firmly. "He might embarrass us by saying no in front of everybody."

"Merlin! You're right!" Draco said, grey eyes wide. "Sound thinking, Harry. Let's go have a word."

Harry whispered, feeling very cunning, "And if Neville says no, I think Seamus would be a good choice. It would make him and Dean more loyal to the club."

Draco nodded sagely, and the two of them made their way over to Neville, who had taken out his Remembrall again, and was puzzling over it.

"Longbottom!" Draco said, hand on Neville's shoulder. "May we have a word with you?"

The offer was made, and Neville stared at them, clearly astounded.

"You mean," he quavered, "I'd be responsible for keeping order?"

"We're not really expecting any trouble," Harry assured him. "But it's an old tradition, and we thought it would be a good office for a Gryffindor."

Instead of refusing, Neville's eyes shone. "It's like being an Auror!" he said reverently. "I'd be the club's Auror!"

"Serjeant-at-Arms," Draco corrected, "but yes, it amounts to the same thing. What do you say?"

"I'd be honoured!" Neville burst out. "I can't wait to tell Gran! If anybody comes trying to make trouble, I'll show them what's what!"

"Er--yes--very nice," Draco muttered, backing away. He pulled Harry along with him. "We'll have to keep an eye on that one, Harry. Drunk with power in a week, like as not."

"I'd better talk to the other Hufflepuffs," Harry said.

He briefed the members of his own house on Draco's proposal of an office per house. They could see the sense in it, even though he thought Susan was a bit disappointed in not being chosen secretary.

"There are lots of other jobs," Harry pointed out. "Someone will have to be refreshments director--"

Susan became markedly more cheerful. Arranging treats sounded much more amusing than taking minutes.

Harry saw Professor Burbage watching him expectantly, and took a deep breath.

What do I say? Hello--Good afternoon--Welcome to the--

Thinking hard, he walked to the mantelpiece and stood in front of it. Draco smiled approvingly. Silhouetted against the fire, Harry looked very authoritative.

"Good afternoon!" Harry called out, getting everyone's attention. "Welcome to the Wizing World Explorers. I know we'd like to get started. Could you all find a seat?"

The talk died down, and the eleven students sorted themselves out. Harry noticed that they were still somewhat clinging to House loyalties, except for Terry Boot who was sitting with the Gryffindors, and Hermione, who was between Sally and Hannah.

His hands were cold. He discreetly rubbed them on his robes, and tried to think of something clever to say. After a brief pause, he gave it up and spoke frankly.

"Hogwarts is a pretty amazing place, and it's only one part of the wizing world. I think by now that a lot of us realise that we don't know everything we need to know in order to get by." He saw Hermione's earnest face, and added, "And some of use don't want to just get by. We want to really understand the magical world. Some of us had never heard of it before this summer, and some of us--" he gave Neville a grin, "have lived in it all our lives. I think we can learn a lot together, and have a lot of fun, too. First of all, I'd like to thank Professor Burbage for agreeing to help us." He gave the witch a nod.

She gave the students a wave. "Don't mind me. I'll help if I can, but I don't want to spoil your good time. There will be no quizzes and no essays assigned!"

Draco cleared his throat. Harry looked his way.

"Draco--you wanted to say something?"

Draco rose gracefully. "I think before we plunge in, we need to be organized. This club needs officers, and for president I would like--"

Sally called out, "I think Harry should be president!"

There were mutters of agreement.

Draco gave her a kind smile. "That is exactly what I was going to propose. Then are we all agreed on Harry as our leader? Any disagreement?"

People looked at each other, but settled back. Draco went on, "I think we also need a vice-president, a secretary, and a serjeant-at-arms to keep order. Four offices for the four houses."

Primed well ahead of time, Greg bellowed out, "Draco for vice-president!"

"Many thanks, Greg," Draco was trying to imitate his father at his suavest. Treating his own office as a foregone conclusion, he said, "I would like to propose Hermione Granger of Ravenclaw for secretary. I'm sure we can all rely on her to take thorough minutes. And for Serjeant-at-Arms, I would like to propose Neville Longbottom of Gryffindor."

When Harry looked back on it later, he decided it had all been pretty high-handed, but right now nobody was in the mood to raise a fuss. Nor did most of the students present have any desire to hold office. Most of the young minds were on the tea to come.

So the slate of officers was accepted by acclamation, and the meeting moved on to more enjoyable topics. Hermione was thrilled to

be entrusted with secretary, and set herself to taking copious notes as all sorts of topics for study were proposed.

"Wait," Harry said, "I have Professor Burbage's book here." He held it up. "So You Found Out Magic is Real! is the title. It's helped me a lot. There was a chapter about manners that kept me from making an idiot of myself--"

The muggleborn were surprised to learn that there could be significant differences between muggle and magical manners. Hannah, as a halfblood with a muggleborn parent, had some useful background information here.

"Things are a lot more old-fashioned in the wizarding world. My mum thinks it's because people live so long, and so fashions change more slowly. For one thing, call old wizards 'sir' when you speak to them. I know it's not the done thing anymore in the muggle world, but if you don't use 'sir,' you're going to offend lots of people. And you should use 'ma'am' when speaking to very old witches."

Then they acted out introductions, laughing as Seamus introduced Sally-Anne Perks to his Da, as portrayed by Dean Thomas.

"Oi, Da! This is Sally. Sally, me Da."

Justin laughed too, but protested. "We don't all do that!"

So Justin nicely introduced Susan to his mother, Lady Barbara Finch-Fletchley, as portrayed by Hermione Granger.

"You don't need to curtsy, Susan!"

"Why not?" Susan asked. "I saw Sally curtsy to the painting."

This elicited more discussion. Then Draco introduced Neville to his mother, who looked suspiciously like Susan Bones. The muggleborn and most of the halfbloods were entertained by the formal language and the nicely judged bows. Bowing was discussed: when and how deep. Why "Madam" was to be preferred over or "Mrs," and

sometimes over "Miss." Then the subject of table manners was raised, and it was decided that they would postpone that study for teatime.

Everyone had favorite subjects. Draco, of course, wanted to talk about the famous families of the wizarding world. Ernie was promised time to present a talk about the wizarding economy and how businesses were run. Susan was tapped to tell the real story behind Getting On at the Ministry, Hannah wanted to teach something about magical cooking and domestic life. Neville was pressed to tell about magical gardening: its pleasures and hazards. It was agreed that they would work out a schedule for the topics. Nearly everyone had a suggestion. They would fill a year of meetings--and more.

Harry said, "Vince and Greg's fathers work on a magical farm. They can tell us about sheep-raising and farm life. I visited the farm that's part of Malfoy Manor, and it was really interesting. They have winged horses."

This stopped the show for some time. Sally, Hermione, Justin, and Terry had not heard before that winged horses existed. Draco swelled with pride, talking about the different breeds and the difficulties of learning to ride them. He promised to bring pictures in future.

Hermione wanted to know more about tutoring and home schooling. Susan was full of stories about the fun they had at Madam Hornpipe's, learning lots of traditional dances.

"Couldn't we do that today?" Sally asked. Susan and Hannah grew quite excited at the idea.

"Oh, let's! We could do the Barley Twist!"

Harry's heart froze with horror. Dancing! "You said we didn't have enough girls!"

"You don't dance the Barley Twist with partners, Harry. It's a ring dance. The girls can form a ring inside with the boys outside. Professor Burbage, do you know the charms for the music?"

Charity Burbage did indeed know how to produce the old tune, and brought the students out into the open dance floor, giving them a little background on the dance. There were two dances, actually, a Sowing Dance and a Reaping Dance. She glossed over the grosser aspects of the origins and symbolism of the Sowing Dance, while giving them enough for context.

"When wizards and witches lived among muggles, they helped their communities with rituals like these. Music and dance are a good way to teach charms to a group that has little magic and no wands. Most of the old dances have been forgotten by muggles, but they are still a living part of our tradition, especially among those with ties to the land."

Susan volunteered to lead the chant, a string of syllables that conveyed nothing to Harry, but which was supposed to help barley grow tall and eventually make splendid ale. Seamus Finnegan in particular thought this a very noble idea.

The students linked hands and began moving in a circle. Harry immediately crashed into Draco.

"Move to the left," Draco told him quickly, "Always to the left in this dance, Harry."

In a flash, Harry could picture a page from *The Path of Darkness*: "--and the priestesses' chief duty was the appeasement of the Great Powers of the Earth. In their ritual dances, they moved, as one must always move in a rite involving chthonic forces, to the left."

At once it all made more sense to him. The steps were not that complicated, though he felt an awful bungler. In the girls' circle, Sally was picking up the dance very quickly, moving neatly and gracefully. The girls were circling much more quickly than the boys, and Susan was calling out the movements.

"Now we stand still. Hermione--back up a step. Now we're going to move in and out among the boys. Follow me!"

"Na ei rhystan, rhystan, rhystan,

Forigh' plagath Cthallamanthos,

Dur'nu baglo, Va'su tasno,

Cthallamanthos ya leibam!"

Harry wanted to ask what the words meant, but there was no chance to ask. It was almost hypnotic, watching the girls weaving in and out under the boys upraised arms. For a moment, he thought he could catch the scent of earth and green shoots. There was a part that involved clapping, and another part that called for kicking, which got the boys very tickled and giggly.

"Oi! Watch it, Finnegan!" Terry Boot complained.

"Shut your gob and think of the ale," Finnegan shot back.

They went through the dances three times before everyone was satisfied that they had been done properly. Faces were flushed and everyone was ready for tea.

And what a tea it was! Susan and Hannah had given a lovingly composed list to the house elves, and everything they had asked for was laid out in grand style. Harry thought that his heroes from *The Wind in the Willows* would have nodded their own approval. Cucumber sandwiches, with the cucumber cut beautifully thin; potted shrimp sandwiches and egg-and-cress sandwiches and walnut and cream cheese sandwiches; bridge rolls with asparagus tips and tiny shepherd's pies; plain scones, blackberry scones, and ginger scones because Hannah liked ginger; clotted cream and lemon curd and strawberry jam; marmalade cake and Simnel cake and jam tarts. Harry tried a jam tart and liked it, but the taste was new to him.

"They're filled with snareberry jam, Harry," Neville explained.

Hermione listened, trying to continue taking notes while eating.

Neville told them about a plant called Devil's Snare that could trap people. Witch's Snare was a cultivar of that dangerous plant, not as dangerous, and with edible fruit. You used light to avoid the branches catching at you, and also to push them back in winter to get at the fruits: pods of multiple berries that were bright blue when harvested, but cooked down to that purplish colour.

"It's good," Harry agreed, brushing away crumbs.

Dean and Seamus walked by, still stuffing themselves with cake. "This was a great idea, Harry!" Dean said. "Thanks for inviting us! I really learned a lot today."

"Me, too," Seamus agreed, "Ron's going to be sorry he missed it. Those daft girls too." They linked arms and did a few steps from the Barley Twist, getting the words all wrong.

"But what do they mean?" Hermione asked Hannah. "What language is that?"

"No idea."

Hermione went off to ask Professor Burbage about it, and Draco swooped in for mutual congratulations.

"What a success! The girls will want to kill themselves when they hear they missed the dancing! We might get Blaise next time. He was a bit under the weather this week. Theo I don't know about. His father doesn't like the idea of mixing even for educational purposes. He's a bit queer, anyway. We'll have to chip away at the Ravenclaws, I suppose, but serves them right for fancying themselves so clever! I'll write Father tonight and tell him all about it! When the rest are gone let's work out the next programme. I still think we should learn about the important families--teach the new lot a bit of respect."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I think the winged horses got you all the respect that even you could possibly want."

Draco glowed. "Yes. They liked that, didn't they?"

By half past four, the meeting was breaking up, and the students drifted away in small groups. Harry promised to meet his housemates for dinner, even though no one imagined they could possibly be hungry. Draco wanted to settle on the schedule while it was fresh in their minds, and Hermione stayed with them to write down every word for posterity. Neville stayed with them because he was the Serjeant-at-Arms, and it was his duty. He strolled about the room, hands behind his back, a very serious expression on his face.

Professor Burbage took her leave, too. "I'm so pleased you all had such a good time. A wonderful idea, Harry. Same time next Sunday, I presume." She was off in a whirl of lavender silk and the scent of lime flowers.

Hermione said, "Professor Burbage is awfully nice."

"I'll tell her it was really your idea, Hermione," Harry said, feeling a bit guilty.

"It doesn't matter whose idea it was," Draco declared. "A good idea is a good idea. Well done, Granger. So--next week-- "

They talked another half-hour, and settled on wizarding farming, since Draco pointed out there were lots of dances associated with that, and dancing "always brings the girls." Hermione, surprisingly, agreed, and said it was all very interesting. Draco also felt that the Shepherd's Dance would be appropriate, and he would be happy to talk about the importance of Malfoy Manor in producing wool for robes.

"--and Vince and Greg can add their bit about caring for the beasts."

"Perhaps they could bring a sheep--a little lamb, I mean," Hermione suggested eagerly.

"Granger," Draco said with withering scorn. "This is not lambing time--at least in the magical world. Perhaps the muggles arrange things differently."

"--and that's exactly what we should be learning," Harry broke in, to smooth things over. "People don't know what they don't know. It would be neat if we could have a real sheep."

"Sheep stink," Draco said dismissively. "However, I'm sure one could be sent from home--washed thoroughly."

"That's very helpful of you," Hermione said.

Draco nodded, overflowing with noblesse oblige. Harry was tempted to thump him.

Neville strolled back to them, looking rather cheerful. "I think we should always have a special wizarding treat that muggles don't have," he suggested. "Like those snareberry tarts."

"A very sound idea, Longbottom," Draco approved.

"Yes," Harry agreed, "I think that's just the sort of thing that people enjoy learning about. About this dancing business, though--"

They moved toward the hall, still talking. Harry's mind was half on his Astronomy essay. He stepped past the doorway, following the others.

Splat!

Something heavy and wet hit him in the face, and a horrible stench filled the air.

"GOT YOU! HAHAAHAHAHA!"

"It's Peeves!" Draco shouted. He tried to retreat to the clubroom.

Crash!

The doors slammed shut behind them, trapping them under a hail of dungbombs. Hermione shrieked, and then gargled with disgust and fright as the mess splattered into her eyes.

"SNOTTY POTTY! SNOTTY POTTY AND HIS SNOTTY POTTY FRIENDS! GOT YOU!" The poltergeist cackled madly, zooming overhead, pelting them with all manner of nastiness.

"I'll get you, Peeves!" Neville shouted, "You'll never---aaargh!"

"This way!" Harry said, "The stairs!" He wished furiously he knew someway to stop the wretched creature.

Professor Snape would know what to do.

He caught hold of Hermione, who was crying and wiping at her eyes. Half-dragging her, he turned and ran for the nearest staircase. "Come on, Draco!"

Neville was on the other side of Hermione, helping to pull the blinded girl along.

Draco was outraged. "I'll tell the Baron on you, you--you---"

"Hurry, Draco!" Harry shouted. "Up here!"

The poltergeist cackled again, and sounded oddly as if it had an echo. Harry instantly recognised the hated sound of boys' snickers--the kind of laugh he knew from Dudley and Piers and years of Harry-Hunting. Someone had set Peeves on them. Peeves zoomed down again, and yanked on Draco's robes, pulling the boy down hard onto the slippery floor.

"Ow! Harry! Help!"

Furious, Harry whirled on his tormentors and screamed out the first spell that came to him.

"Incendio!"

A roaring jet of flame seared down the hall, catching a surprised and squealing Peeves. There were boys' alarmed shouts, and Harry saw Zach Smith and Ron Weasley dashing away, their faces wild with shock.

Draco looked up, trembling, as the flames died down. Portraits protested in their burning frames. Further down the hall, a suit of armor toppled with a tremendous clatter. Fading squeaks of "Snotty, Rotty, Potty," echoed down the hall.

"Harry!" breathed Neville into the appalled silence. "That was amazing!"

"What this, my sweet?" complained an old man's voice in the distance. "Students dirtying my clean halls?"

"Oh, Harry!" moaned Hermione, at last able to see again, and looking around her in horror, "We're doomed!"

The complaints were coming closer. Harry hissed, "Run!"

He pulled Draco up and waved maniacally at Neville, who caught Hermione by the hand. The four of them ran up the steps and darted down a hall. There was a big door in front of them. Harry sprinted ahead and flung it open, hustling his friends inside. They shut the door and stood there, panting.

"We're safe for now," Harry said. "Let's wait a bit and sneak down to the Great Hall."

"That's all very well," Hermione snapped. "I hope we can find our way!"

"I'm going to get that Smith," Neville vowed. "Imagine! Setting Peeves on a girl! It's very bad form!"

"Absolutely appalling," Draco agreed, flinching as he wiped filth from his robes. "Harry, you nearly toasted me, you know. This robe will never--" He paused, jaw dropping. Harry stared at him, wondering why Draco's eyes were so wide--so very, very wide--

Hermione gasped, "The third floor corridor! We're not supposed to be--here---"

Draco clutched at Neville's arm. All of them were staring straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a gigantic dog with three heads. Three pairs of eyes, three wet noses twitching at the scent of the intruders, three drooling mouths lined with yellowed fangs.

Three throats that growled ominously.

They were too terrified to scream. Quickly, Harry groped for the doorknob, and they all tumbled out of the room. Harry slammed the door shut, and they ran back down the corridor.

"Must--go--down," Harry muttered, not thinking very clearly. They found another staircase and ran down. And down. And down. They did not stop running until they were in familiar territory, not far from the Great Hall.

Hermione clutched her side, gasping.

Draco sputtered indignantly, "What do they think they're doing, keeping a thing like that in a school?"

They were silent, pondering the matter.

Harry thought quickly. He knew something about avoiding trouble. "We can't be seen like this. Let's get to the toilets and get cleaned up before dinner."

Hermione was in a terrible temper. "You don't use your eyes, any of you! Didn't you see what it was standing on?"

Draco caught his breath, and nodded, "A trapdoor. It's guarding something."

"What's at Hogwarts that needs that to guard it?" Neville wondered.

"I don't know," Harry muttered. "But we should find out. It's not safe."

"Boys!" Hermione glared at them. "You'd be mad to go back there! We could have been killed--or worse, expelled. Now, if you don't mind,

I'm going to wash my h--h--hair!" Her voice broke, and she rushed away.

Draco nodded again, "Sound idea, Granger!" he called after her.

Another furious exclamation, and the door to the girls' toilet slammed shut.

N.A. Wintringham and Graves are listed by JKR as members of the Weird Sisters, and based on the dates of birth she gives them, would still be students at this point. The instruments she assigns them are no doubt meant to be whimsical, but it all sounds like a handful of isolated musicians trying desperately to have some sort of musical culture.

I know that canon Hermione never says anything about playing an instrument, but considering how gifted she is, I tend to believe that her parents would have encouraged something as enriching as music lessons.

The "words" to the Barley Twist dance are in the ancient language of Noknown. I made them up, slightly influenced by H.P Lovecraft.

Please don't send me a review telling me I spelled Serjeant/Sergeant incorrectly. "Serjeant-at-Arms" is the spelling used for the office in the House of Commons.

Chapter 27

"Three heads?" Justin scoffed. "Are you having us on, Harry?"

Harry had immediately confided his adventures to his fellow Hufflepuffs in the Common Room Sunday night after dinner, feeling that if there were monsters in Hogwarts, it was something that his friends should know for their own protection.

"I swear, it was gigantic! Draco and Neville and Hermione saw it too!"

"A Cerberus," Ernie frowned. "It must have been."

"Who would keep a Cerberus in a school?" wondered Susan.

"That's pretty much what Draco said, Harry snorted, "but he was a lot more excited at the time."

"Well, Professor Dumbledore must have arranged it," Hannah pointed out. "He must know what he's doing."

"I hope so," said Sally, "but what could be important enough to risk students being hurt?"

"Hermione saw that it was chained over a trapdoor," Harry told them. "I reckon it could be guarding something."

"But what?" Justin asked.

For the moment, no one had a clue. Harry wondered if he should ask Professor Snape. The Professor undoubtedly knew, but asking about a three-headed dog would amount to a confession that Harry had been where he had been specifically instructed not to go. The Professor trusted Harry not to be a troublemaker. Harry decided that the Professor would just worry needlessly if heard about the accidental journey to the third floor. Better to keep quiet, and protect his guardian's peace of mind. It wouldn't do any harm for Harry to do a bit of research on his own.

Monday morning found them back in classes, but gossip and whispers were the order of the day. Zach Smith and Ron Weasley had been apprehended fleeing the second floor corridor and had lost Gryffindor twenty points each for their shocking destructiveness. An attempt to blame it all on Harry Potter only cost them more.

More painful to Ron than the loss of house points were the acid remarks of Fred and George.

"Not the cleverest of pranks, dear brother," said Fred.

"No wit, no style, no je-ne-sais-quoi," said George. "Besides, Potter saved your arse--"

"--during your first flying lesson."

"And worst of all, you were--"

"--caught."

"That will cost you--hmm--"

"--fifty Twin Points from Ronald Weasley's--"

"--life-time total."

Percy, too, shook his head in disappointment. "What were you thinking, Ron? The Wizarding World Explorers is an excellent idea--excellent. Instead of attending and sharing your knowledge of our world, you behave like a hooligan and attack innocent students."

"Potter nearly roasted me alive!" Ron exploded. "We just threw a few dungbombs. No call to shoot bloody great blasts of fire after us! He's the one who burned up the corridor!"

Percy only tutted, and the twins exchanged speculative looks.

Ron's remarks were overheard by older students from several houses, and by the end of the day awe-struck rumour had it that "Harry Potter can control Fiendfyre!"

The subject of all this admiration was oblivious to it, however. Harry was still thinking over the pleasures of the club meeting, and the surprising events afterward.

The Hufflepuff first years agreed that the existence of the Cerberus should be kept confidential, just as the four who had stumbled upon it had decided. Here was a real mystery, and blabbing about it could spoil their own attempts at solving it. Besides, Professor Dumbledore had obviously meant for it to be secret.

Draco was the most inclined to tell, longing to owl his father about the shocking state of Hogwarts security. After an appeal from the others, his owl had been limited to the success of the club meeting, the humble gratitude of his social inferiors, and the smoothness with which the slate of officers had been accepted. The excellent tea and the dancing were given their due. Foolish pranksters had attempted to waylay them and had been soundly defeated. All in all, quite a cheerful message was sent off to Malfoy Manor.

The excellent tea was gloated about to everyone not fortunate enough to have been there. That and the dancing resulted in a great upswell of interest in what had been a somewhat questionable venture.

Contrary to Draco's predictions, Pansy and Daphne did not kill themselves when they heard they had missed the dancing. However, they were determined never to miss it again.

Terry Boot was talking with uncommon animation to the other two Ravenclaw boys, Anthony Goldstein and Michael Corner, and they were listening with interest.

The Ravenclaw girls, however, were sitting at some distance from Terry, and were whispering among themselves. Hermione was not with them. The four girls seemed angry and pleased all at once, and Harry wondered if they were sorry they hadn't come to the meeting.

Gryffindor was easier to read, or hear, at least, because the conversationS were anything but quiet. Zach was sulking over his sausages, and Ron was being raked over the coals by his brothers. Dean and Seamus were telling all the older students about the wonderful time they'd had. Neville was being congratulated by Percy Weasley on his new office. Neville seemed very happy, and told Percy he had owed his Gran last night with the news.

Lavender and Parvati were debating attending the next meeting, their voices growing ever more shrill. Lavender was very sorry she had not enjoyed the treats and the dancing and the socialising with all the other firsties at what sounded like a very nice party to her.

"It was silly not to go!" she complained. "What do I care who your sister likes and doesn't like? Everybody had a good time but us!"

Parvati was trying to agree with Lavender on the one hand and explain about not hurting her sister's feelings on the other. She saw other people looking their way and lowered her voice.

The owls arrived, and Harry was astonished to find that Hedwig was bringing him a letter. In his excitement, he dropped it on his plate, getting quite a bit of egg on it. He tore it open, and read the untidy scrawl:

Dear Harry,

I know you get Wednesday afternoons off, so would you like to come and have a cup of tea with me around three? I want to hear all about how you're settling in at Hogwarts. Send us an answer back with Hedwig.

Hagrid

Harry scribbled a quick

Yes, please. Thank you for the invitation.

on the back of the note and sent Hedwig off again.

"It's from Hagrid," he explained to the others. "Inviting me to tea on Wednesday."

There was a stir of whispers and giggles that made Harry look up. Hermione Granger was coming to breakfast, and looked as if she had been crying. She tried to find a place to sit at the Ravenclaw table, but somehow there was no room. Students moved closer together, grinning, and Mandy Brocklehurst tossed her hair, asking Hermione, "Aren't your feet cold? In the wizarding world we wear shoes."

"Shoooooessss," Morag drawled out sweetly. "Perhaps muggles haven't invented them yet."

Hermione stared at them, on the verge of tears, "I never did anything to you."

"You exist," Mandy smirked. The other first year girls giggled.

Harry was angry, and glanced up at the Head Table to see if they were aware of what was going on. No. They were talking among themselves, or reading the paper. He wanted to go to Hermione, but was on the wrong side of the table.

Susan Bones, however, was not. She slapped her hand on the table with a crack that made people around her stare. She stormed over to the Ravenclaws and caught Hermione by the arm.

"Come sit with us, Hermione." She narrowed her eyes and hissed at Mandy, "Shame on you!" She looked at all the girls in turn, and repeated quietly, "Shame on you."

Turning her back on them, she pulled Hermione along to sit with the Hufflepuffs. Hannah moved over, and patted the seat beside her. Ernie and Justin hardly knew what to say, but passed her the toast, as a sign of solidarity.

Sally asked angrily, "Did they take your shoes this time? They call themselves witches, but I think they don't know how to spell!"

The Hufflepuffs burst out laughing. Hermione sniffled, and then joined in the laughter a little weakly.

"You should talk to Professor Flitwick, Hermione," Hannah said. "I'm sure he'd make them stop."

Hermione shivered. "But he wouldn't be in the dorm with me at night. It might make them worse."

Harry tore his toast to pieces, feeling horribly guilty. Why had he ever opened his mouth to Hermione about the Houses?

"We'll make them give your shoes back." He shot a dark glare at the Ravenclaw girls, which quieted them down for all of five minutes.

Everyone at the Hufflepuff table was particularly nice to Hermione, passing her eggs and marmalade. Cedric asked if Hermione liked bacon or sausage better. Eloise Midgen wondered if Hermione would like some pumpkin juice. There were more angry looks cast at the Ravenclaws, and not all of them by first years.

The Gryffindor/Slytherin antagonism was so bitter that it generally overshadowed all other rivalries at Hogwarts. That did not mean that other rivalries did not exist. Now and then the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff tensions boiled into real hostility, and this looked to be such a time.

"Anyway," Hermione said bravely, "I've got my essays and my books. I slept with them," she confessed, and smiled a little as the Hufflepuffs laughed again.

"You can borrow a pair of my shoes, Hermione," Sally offered.

"They wouldn't fit," Susan said sensibly. She told Hermione, "You can borrow mine. Auntie taught me a way to adjust shoes a bit. Sally has such itsy-bitsy baby feet that no way could anyone else wear her shoes."

"I do not have baby feet," Sally contradicted.

"Tiny, adorable, petite doll feet," Hannah cooed.

"Oh, stop!" Sally complained, flicking breadcrumbs at her.

"There's no time anyway," Hermione said in despair. "We've got to get to Transfiguration. It wouldn't do to be late to Professor McGonagall's class, on top of everything else!"

"After class, then," Susan soothed. "We'll get through this class and then you can come with us afterwards!"

They bustled to class, and Hermione sat between Harry and Sally.

No sooner had class begun, than Mandy Brocklehurst raised her hand and said primly, "Professor, Hermione Granger isn't wearing shoes!"

Minerva McGonagall stared at the girl unblinkingly. She hated tattletales.

"Isn't she, Miss Brocklehurst?" she asked. "I would never have noticed had you not shared that valuable piece of information. Miss Granger," she said, turning to Hermione, "in future, obey the Hogwarts dress code. The stone floors are chilly, and we don't want our students catching their deaths."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione whispered. The smothered sniggers from the Ravenclaw girls caused McGonagall to fix them with an icy look. They subsided, and class was soon underway.

The lesson involved transfiguring a glass marble into a rubber ball. Hermione's single-minded efforts earned her ten points and some warm praise from her teacher. By the end of the class, she seemed more herself. The Hufflepuffs left, taking Hermione with them.

All but Harry, who stood waiting in front of Minerva's desk, his expression very serious.

"Yes, Mr Potter?" she asked, peering at him over her spectacles.

"Professor, I need to talk to you about Hermione."

Minerva looked at him in concern. "Do you happen to know why Miss Granger came to class without her shoes?"

Thinking he was being accused, Harry protested, "It wasn't me, Professor! It's the girls in Ravenclaw. They're taking her things and being rotten to her. Jealous of her, I think. Hermione's really smart and works hard. I know I promised never to teach that runic ward to anyone else, but would you give me permission to teach it to Hermione so she can protect herself?"

"I'd rather you didn't Mr. Potter," she said, with a quick shake of her head. "I expect you to keep your promise. However, don't think I'm being unhelpful. That warding I taught you doesn't work well with personal possessions. I take it you used it on your trunk?"

"Well--yes," he admitted.

"That's quite all right. A trunk would work, but using it on a pair of shoes or a homework assignment might cause other problems. There is an excellent anti-theft jinx that would be just the thing for Miss Granger. I shall have a talk with her Head of House, and see to that he teaches it to her."

"Thanks, Professor, it's really important to me. " Harry shuffled and fidgeted, and then confessed, "I feel horrible about Hermione. The trouble she's having in Ravenclaw is all my fault!"

Minerva was too experienced to laugh at him. "How could the behaviour of her housemates possibly be your fault, Harry?" she asked.

"She wanted to be in Gryffindor and I talked her out of it!" Harry burst out. "I told her on the train about how you had to let the Hat decide and that you needed to go where it wanted to put you. If she'd gone to Gryffindor the way she wanted, she wouldn't be so miserable!"

"You take too much upon yourself!" Minerva told him sternly. "You are in no way responsible for her Sorting, nor for the spiteful conduct

of others. You cannot know that she would ever have been sorted into Gryffindor, nor can you know how life would have been for her had she been sorted there. I shall talk to Professor Flitwick about Miss Granger, and she will learn that jinx. Your only task, as I see it, is to be a good friend. I heard that she was chosen secretary of your club. She obviously has some good friends, even if they may not be in her own house at the moment."

Hermione Granger sat at meals with the Hufflepuffs all that day. The following morning, however, she came down to breakfast with Lisa Turpin and Padma Patil, and sat between them. The Ravenclaw table was rather subdued in the wake of an emergency staff meeting that resulted in some quick and decisive action.

Flitwick had been upset and embarrassed, and above all ashamed that this unpleasant Ravenclaw custom still manifested itself when he believed he had stamped it out.

He knew something about being the outsider at Hogwarts, though it was very long ago and only Albus remembered it. The boys and girls who had tormented him and called him stupid, foul names were all long dead. He had compensated by the being the best of them: by using his intellect like a rapier, by proving that physical height was not the measure of magic, by becoming a dueling champion, by becoming a Hogwarts professor. However, it was not easy (and Severus Snape also acknowledged it) for a male Head of House to keep an eye on what went on in the girls dormitories--not without being something of a pervert, at least. Sprout and McGonagall confessed to similar problems with their male students.

"At least it has come to light early in the year, Filius," Dumbledore remarked optimistically. "You can deal with the problem before it festers."

"--and before the Granger girl is badly injured, or simply leaves Hogwarts," Snape observed.

Flitwick knew Snape had suffered some ugly treatment himself at Hogwarts: not just from Potter and Black, but from members of Snape's own house. Snape certainly understood what it was like to be in constant danger, in a place where one ought to feel protected. Perhaps if Snape had had anywhere else to go he might well have turned his back on the wizarding world himself.

"It would have been a shame," Pomona Sprout declared. "A hard-working, diligent student. I really don't know why those girls are targeting her. She seems perfectly nice to me, if a little--"

"--overzealous?" Snape drawled.

"Harry Potter brought this to my attention, I'm glad to say," Minerva told the staff. "So many boys would have been indifferent or willfully blind. And he did it not to tattle, but to help a friend. He had promised me not to divulge some runic magic I taught him, and came to me to ask permission to teach Miss Granger how to ward her things, rather than break his word. Of course, the jinx is better in this situation."

"H--H--Harry P--P--Potter," stammered Quirrell. "Q--Q--Quite the young l--l--leader. Starts a club for the mu--mu--mu--mu--"

"--muggleborn," Minerva muttered impatiently.

"Th--th--thank you, M--M--Minerva," Quirrell said, his voice rising with the effort of speech. "S--S--S--S--S---Starts a club and rescues a damsel in d--d--distress, practically s--s--s--s--s--simultaneously!"

Sprout eyed Quirrell with a displeased, puzzled look. "Yes, he is a young leader, and I, for one, am very proud of him!"

"--And all of this does nothing to deal with students who do appear to dislike the idea of the Explorers' Club itself. Zacharias Smith and Ronald Weasley," Snape sneered, "will bear watching, in my opinion."

"I don't think Ron Weasley is at all like the Smith boy," Sinistra objected. "He doesn't instigate any of the confrontations. I think he's

simply made the wrong friend. Perhaps if he were encouraged to join the club himself--"

Charity Burbage shook her head. "I think it would be a mistake to force any of the students to participate. Let the children continue to have a good time and talk about it. That will do the work better than making it a punishment."

Hooch, sitting in her usual place by the window, surprised them all by speaking up. "Potter saved Weasley from a nasty fall the other day, and Weasley said thanks to Potter. I'd give it time, as Charity says."

It was decided keep a discreet watch on the students who had not participated in the club--especially Smith-- but to do nothing more at the present time. The immediate problem in Ravenclaw was considered far more pressing.

That very evening, Flitwick counselled Hermione: he made it plain that her welfare was of importance to her teachers, and he taught her the anti-theft jinx. She learned it quickly, confirming his opinion that she was a remarkably talented young witch.

He also spoke to each of the other Ravenclaw first-year girls individually, and then had it out with the prefects. He discovered which of the first-year girls had real animus against the muggleborn Miss Granger, and which were simply following along. He wanted to break up that little clique as quickly and decisively as possible, since that was a situation, which given time, could only grow worse.

After these interviews, Flitwick judged that Lisa Turpin had the least personal dislike of Hermione Granger, and that Lisa's friend Padma would support Lisa, rather than attempt to bond with Morag and Mandy. Flitwick was not sure why Mandy Brocklehurst had taken such a fierce dislike to the new student. Very likely, there was no logical cause at all. Sometimes the dynamics of certain groups developed in a negative way, and a small clique was formed that as a group behaved in ways that would be otherwise unthinkable for each of the individuals who were part of it. Four pureblood girls--two close friendships--no place for an outsider. It had gone wrong from the beginning, and he should have been on the watch.

He did not demand that Lisa and Padma pretend that the Granger girl was their best and dearest friend. He did, however, expect the members of his house to behave like gentlewitches and gentlewizards: civil, well-spoken, and above all, rational.

"They gave you back your things, then?" Harry asked Hermione, as soon as they had a moment before History began on Tuesday.

Draco, on his other side, eavesdropped shamelessly. Having their club secretary put upon by her own house would affect the prestige of their club as a whole. And Granger wasn't so bad, after all. She listened to him very respectfully during their flying lessons. Almost as importantly, she was reading ahead in Defense against the Dark Arts, and had caught out that fool Quirrell in repeated mistakes.

It was becoming something of a game for the two of them, seeing who could prove that sorry excuse for a Defense professor wrong the most times in class. Common muggleborns, he had heard, were always weak in Defense, not understanding the importance--the majesty--of the subject. Hermione Granger was taking it very seriously, and learning all she could. Father had told him that it was important to be flexible when one met that rare, exceptional muggleborn like Harry Potter's mother.

Harry thought Hermione seemed in better spirits than usual, as she told him, "Yes--and they apologised. They said it was meant as a joke, but they realised that it hadn't been very clever. I don't know how sincere they were, but Professor Flitwick made it clear that I was to come to him immediately if I ever had any trouble again. He's very nice--and quite brilliant, you know-- he thinks our club is a wonderful idea---"

"He's no fool, certainly," Draco broke in. "You know he was a dueling champion. It's a shame he doesn't teach Defense, in place of that turbaned posser!"

"I'm sure Professor Quirrell is doing his best, Draco," Hermione said primly.

Draco smirked, "I'm sure you're right!"

Harry choked back a laugh.

"Sshhhh!" Sally hushed them. "Professor Binns is here!"

"Oh, spare me," Draco sneered.

Another hour of utter boredom. Harry tried to pay attention, but found himself doodling in his notebook, drawing stick figures of his friends: Hermione with masses of curls, Draco with a pointed nose and superior expression, Neville with a toad, Sally dancing on her toes, Ernie sitting in thought, chin on his fist, Susan with her long plait, Hannah with her pigtails, Justin leaning on a sports car with the word "Lamborghini," on it.

At the end of the class, Hermione said, "I've completed writing up the minutes of the first meeting, and I've learned a replicating charm, so each of the officers will have a copy." She distributed them, to Harry's astonishment, and then she suggested, "Perhaps we should get together before the next meeting, to plan things out."

"I'm free tomorrow afternoon," Draco told them, "and so are you, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "I promised to have tea with Hagrid."

"Tea? With the groundskeeper?" Draco grimaced.

"I told you. He's very nice. Professor Snape says he knows all about the forest and its creatures."

"Do you suppose," Hermione asked slowly, "that he might know about three-headed dogs?"

A pause, and Draco said, "Well done, Granger! I daresay that's just up his alley. Harry, I'll go along with you and we'll pump this Hagrid for information!"

Hermione protested, "But I want to go, too! Perhaps we should all go, and we can make some plans for the club on the way there and back."

Neville had listened in, and suggested, "Maybe we could have Hagrid come and talk to our club sometime, and tell everybody what's really in the Forest. I heard he goes there more than anyone."

The idea was approved, and at five minutes to three on Wednesday, the four of them left the castle and made their way across the grounds.

Hagrid lived in a small wooden house on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. A crossbow and a pair of galoshes were outside the front door.

"How very--rustic," Draco observed.

Harry elbowed him, and then knocked at the door. Inside there was a frantic scrabbling and several booming barks.

Then Hagrid's voice rang out, saving, "Back, Fang, back!"

Draco's eyes widened, and he moved away from the door. "You don't suppose--"

"Fang?" Neville faltered.

"It couldn't be," Hermione said anxiously. "I mean, the house is just too small!"

The door opened a crack, and Hagrid peered down at them.

"Hang on," he said. "Back, Fang."

"Fang?" Neville repeated.

Hagrid let them in, struggling to hold on to the collar of an enormous black boarhound. Draco blew out a relieved breath, and drew himself up. Harry grinned at him.

There was only one room inside. Hams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire, and in the corner stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it. Hermione looked around her, fascinated.

"Witches and wizards live in all sorts of extraordinary ways."

Draco muttered, "The most extraordinary thing is that I'm here to have tea!"

"Make yerselves at home," said Hagrid, letting go of Fang, who bounded straight at an astonished Neville and started licking his ears.

"This is Neville Longbottom," Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring boiling water into a large teapot and putting rock cakes onto a plate. "And this is Hermione Granger. And this is Draco Malfoy."

Hagrid glanced uneasily at Draco's pale, pointed face.

"A Malfoy, eh?" He gave Draco a grudging nod. "Well, if yer a friend o' Harry's, yer welcome here!"

The rock cakes were shapeless lumps with raisins that almost broke their teeth. Harry belatedly remembered that Professor Snape had warned him about them. However, Neville discovered that dunking them in the tea softened them enough to eat. Hermione sniffed, but Draco shrugged and dunked along with the rest of the boys. The cakes were not half bad, after all.

"Professor Snape said you know all about the forest, Hagrid," Harry said, thinking himself very subtle. "I'll bet there aren't many creatures you can't tell us about. We're in a first-year club for learning about the wizarding world, and maybe sometime you could come and tell us all about the creatures in the Forbidden Forest."

"Be glad to, Harry! Can't go wrong with learnin' about animals. Fascinatin' creatures in the Forest-- Acromantulae, Unicorns--"

"Any Cerberuses?" Neville blurted out.

"Cerberi," Hermione corrected him. "Cerberi is the correct plural form."

"Cerberuses--Cerberi--Three-headed dogs--whatever--" Draco muttered impatiently.

"Here, now!" Hagrid rumbled. "How do you lot know about Fluffy?"

"Fluffy?" Harry asked incredulously. "Is that his name? We got chased upstairs by Peeves and there was this three-headed dog there. His name is Fluffy?"

Draco demanded, "Why is there a three-headed dog at Hogwarts, anyway?"

"He's mine," Hagrid told them, slurping his tea. "Bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year. I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the--"

"What?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Now don't ask me anymore," Hagrid said gruffly. "That's top secret, that is."

"It looked like it was guarding a trapdoor," Hermione put in. "We were all wondering--"

Hagrid waved at them, "Drink yer tea, you lot. Now you listen to me. Don't you go meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guardin'. That's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicholas Flamel, and don' you forget it!"

He got up to refill the pot.

"Oh, I won't," Harry assured him earnestly. "Not for a minute."

Draco muffled a snort. "Good one, Harry," he whispered.

He jerked his head in a minute nod, and Harry saw what Draco meant. There was a piece of paper lying on the table under the tea cozy. It was a cutting from the Daily Prophet:

Gringotts Break-In Latest!

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on August ninth, widely believed...

"Isn't that the date we met at Diagon Alley, Harry? I heard about the break-in, but I didn't realize that it happened that very day!"

Hermione leaned over to look at the cutting while Hagrid's back was turned.

"The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied earlier that same day," she read.

Harry whispered, "That was the day I met Hagrid, too. He was on his way to Gringotts, on important Hogwarts business, and he was being followed--"

His three companions were waiting breathlessly.

"-- by Professor Quirrell."

Note: No, I'm not shipping Hermione/Draco. They re just little kids. However, Draco's parents are likely to be as watchful as any passionate Dramione shipper. Draco will no doubt refer to her as "Granger" when writing to his parents, and it may be some time before Lucius and Narcissa know that his muggleborn associate is female. Of more moment is that fact that Draco is doing that vexing thing that embarrasses the life out of parents: he is taking literally a throwaway remark that Lucius made as a sop to decency. When he told Draco to be flexible about outstanding muggleborns, he simply meant that there was no reason to insult Lily Evans Potter, who after all is conveniently dead. Draco, however, took the remark at face

value, and since Hermione is the most outstanding muggleborn of his year, he thinks his father meant people like her. Someday Lucius will have to decide whether he wants to stick to his hard-line blood principles, or if he would rather his son not think him a liar and a hypocrite.

Chapter 28

The four first years sat out by the lake for some time, thinking through what they had learned at Hagrid's.

"I know I've heard that name," Draco said. "Nicholas Flamel. I know I've heard it."

Harry said, "I have too. He's a famous alchemist. I have this gigantic book in my trunk all about him. It was my mum's. Professor Snape told me she was really interested in Potions."

"Actually," Hermione pointed out primly, "potions and alchemy aren't at all the same thing. Alchemy is the study of metals--sort of like inorganic chemistry, and--"

"Yes, thank you, Granger, I have heard of alchemy," Draco interrupted her. "Anyway, it sounds like Flamel and Dumbledore know each other. Maybe they worked on something together--potions and alchemy do overlap somewhat, even though it's been donkey's years since alchemy was taught at Hogwarts. Father thinks that's a great mistake."

"It's probably in your book, Harry," Neville said. "Maybe they did something together in the war against Grindelwald. A secret weapon, maybe."

Harry grimaced. "I don't know, Neville. It's a really long book. Hundreds of pages. It'll take me forever to find out."

"Not if you look in the index," Hermione informed him. "Look in the index for 'Dumbledore.' If you like, I'll do it."

Harry shook his head, feeling a little jealous of sharing something that had belonged to his mother. "It was my mum's book. I really ought to do it myself. I'll check the index. That doesn't sound too bad. Thanks for the idea!"

"Now that that's settled," Hermione said, "I think we should work on a list of possible club programs. It's not too early to decide. People need time to prepare, after all. Do you suppose some parents would be allowed to come and talk about their careers?"

"You might hear things you don't like," Draco snarked. "My father would come if we asked, but his career is being the head of our family. It's not something you can aspire to be--unless you're born to it!"

Hermione huffed, rather offended.

Harry said, "Probably your father would be too busy, I suppose, but it would be interesting to hear what he does all day."

Draco snorted. "Harry, not even my mother knows what Father does all day."

The Headmaster's office was the locus of the extraordinary at Hogwarts. There were collected the rarest of books, the strangest of artifacts, the oldest of relics. Snape had been there many times through the years, but had never been invited to simply browse at his leisure. He knew that things the Headmaster thought too dangerous for public viewing--or even for the Restricted Section--were kept here, away from the eyes of lesser witches and wizards.

Occasionally it annoyed him, especially when he glimpsed that thin green volume that he had reason to believe was a lost work of Pliny the Elder on the uses of silphium. Yes--there it was, not twelve feet away. Dumbledore had not done a jot of scholarly research since becoming Headmaster decades ago. It was insufferable that he was hoarding all these treasures. Not for the first time, Snape wondered if Dumbledore would notice if Snape were to borrow that one slender book-- perhaps at the end of the meeting, when he was distracted--

"Ah, Hagrid!" Dumbledore called out, "Join us, if you will. I believe we can begin now."

Looking around the room, Snape realized that this was the same group that the Headmaster had mentioned when he told Snape that he needed some very special magical protections for a certain precious object. Yes: Minerva, Filius, Pomona, Hagrid, and Quirrell. And himself, of course.

Now that he knew that the object in question was the Philosopher's Stone, he was deeply concerned. Knowing that there was an individual in the room seeking to steal it for the Dark Lord forced him to exert all his occlumency and all his acting skills not to glare at the pasty-faced young man in the purple turban, the one who dared to sit just a little closer to Snape than he ought. Snape longed to push him away, and wondered what would happen if he did.

Quirrell's behavior to Harry in class was deplorable, but Albus would allow no interference. It was all part of the Grand Plan, whatever that was. That the students' education was being sacrificed was of no consequence, it seemed. At least Snape could help Harry catch up on his studies a bit during their Saturday afternoons.

His attention was riveted when the Headmaster produced a curious casket of antique make, inlaid with exotic woods and mother-of-pearl, and set it before him on his desk.

"I thought," said Dumbledore, "that this was the proper moment for you to have a look at the artifact we are all working to protect."

Minerva McGonagall gave the Headmaster a sudden startled look. Uneasily, she glanced at Snape. He felt Minerva's questing gaze, and looked her way, lifting his brows.

Beside him, Quirrell shifted forward eagerly. Snape grimaced at the reek of garlic.

Not even requiring a touch or a word from Dumbledore, the casket slowly opened, and flashes of crimson light flooded the room.

"Oh, my!" breathed Pomona Sprout, utterly enchanted with the beauty of the thing. Flitwick squeaked shrilly and clasped a hand over his mouth in embarrassment. Snape felt his scalp prickle. Only a

handful of people could claim to have seen the Philosopher's Stone. That he was now one of them was immensely gratifying.

The Stone itself was irregular in shape, with a glassy, rippling sheen to it, a luminous ruby red--or brighter, really, since most real rubies had something of a pinkish cast. This was a true scarlet, and the vivid, radiant colour reminded Snape of the stained glass he had seen when the Evanses had taken him with them to church one Christmas morning.

This was not glass, however. It sparkled and pulsed with magic. The very air took on a different flavour in the presence of the thing.

They all leaned forward, admiring. Some did more than lean. Quirrell's hand stretched out.

"Might I," he murmured, "touch it?"

The box slid away toward Dumbledore. The Headmaster smiled.

"I'm afraid not. Dear Nicholas insisted. We are not to touch it--not directly at least."

The box clicked shut and everyone in the room sighed with disappointment.

"We really must get to work," Dumbledore declared. "One could spend one's life studying such an object, but our task is to defend it. My good old friend finds it such a burden. With his assistance, I came up with a few ideas that I hope you all found of interest. Hagrid here has already done his part--most thoroughly and creditably."

The half-giant beamed and ducked his head, with a muttered, "T'weren't nothin'."

Albus was having none of it. "On the contrary, an excellent effort. We are all in your debt."

Everyone was longing to ask what exactly Hagrid had done, but Dumbledore had decided that each of their tasks must be kept secret.

between himself and the specific member of staff. Snape could think of all sorts of ways of winking the information out of Hagrid, but it would be unkind to take advantage of the fellow's good will towards him.

In private meetings, Albus had given each of them the germ of an idea to base their defense upon. He had consulted with them, approving and refining the concepts until they met his requirements. Snape knit his brows, pondering the meaning behind his own challenge. A logic puzzle? It hardly sounded the sort of thing that would delay the Dark Lord for long. It might amuse him, in fact--it might give him a feeling of superiority if he could overcome the best that Hogwarts' best could devise.

Beside him, he saw a crafty smirk twitch the corners of Quirrell's mouth. What had Dumbledore asked of him? What was the purpose of asking the individual most under suspicion to help protect the Stone? Was Dumbledore merely marking time? Was there something else behind all of this?

After a little more discussion, they were dismissed. To Snape's disgust, Dumbledore bade them a twinkling farewell, standing directly in front of a certain little green book. Snape had no time for it anyway. He must get the Headmaster alone and find out all he could about the current situation.

His opportunity came shortly after lunch the next day. He waited impatiently to be admitted, and found Dumbledore writing letters, the window open to a cool, sweet breeze. Fawkes gave him a friendly chirp.

"My dear boy!" Dumbledore greeted him, "What can I do for you on this splendid afternoon? Have you come to have a bird's eye view of the Hufflepuff quidditch practice?"

Snape had forgotten the Hufflepuffs were holding their practice today, instead of waiting for the weekend. He walked to the window, and saw tiny, faraway figures darting about on broomsticks.

A cluster of students were watching, including all the first-year Hufflepuffs. He saw Harry's dark head in the midst of them. Even at this distance, he could see the boy's attention was entirely focused on the Hufflepuff Seeker, Cedric Diggory. Harry had told him that the Diggory boy had been kind to him. Unsurprising. Cedric Diggory was an outstanding student--popular and athletic--and no slouch on the academic side, either.

Snape grimaced. The Diggory lad was, in fact, very much like James Potter in some ways--or perhaps, more precisely, like James Potter would have described himself. Diggory had none of Potter's arrogance--none of his malicious streak, either. A decent lad, in short: one who did not require the humiliation of others to make himself important.

"Harry is wild for a broom of his own," Snape remarked. "I would give him one at Christmas, but then he would be wanting to bring it to school. Perhaps I shall get one for him as a present at the end of the year, if his marks warrant it."

"Yes--I've heard about Harry's budding talent," Dumbledore answered. "Was there something else on your mind?"

Snape turned, and folded his arms in front of him, scowling. "You know there is. A logic puzzle? What kind of protection is that? Why not a ward net? A lethal potions trap? Why not the Fidelius? I daresay Flamel did not want to put a curse on the Stone itself--"

"Certainly not!"

"But you could create foolproof defenses. A logic puzzle sounds like you're playing games!"

"Perhaps I am," Dumbledore replied, in a tone of calm reason.

"Are you serious about keeping the Stone from Quirrell?"

"The Stone is in no danger from him."

"Does he know that?"

Albus actually laughed. "I certainly hope not!" The laughter died away and Dumbledore told Snape, "My dear boy, I know how anxious you are. Try to believe me when I tell you the Stone is perfectly safe. These defenses serve a useful purpose--"

"Rubbish! What purpose, other than to delay--" Snape paused. "You are playing with the Dark Lord, aren't you? Letting him believe himself cleverer than the rest of us--"

"--always his worst failing. He was so terribly vain--"

"---and keeping his servant here, under your eye---"

"--where I know what he is doing."

"Ah." Snape considered that a moment. "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

"Precisely. There are other ways Voldemort could manifest himself--ways that would involve making himself known to his old followers, and building up his support once more--ways that might be more certain than the fabled but elusive Elixir of Life. It seems to me best for Voldemort to hunt after something that he would not wish to share with anyone else. And, as you say, where his activities can be watched."

The formula for the Elixir of Life was fairly well known, and was published in several works. It would not be difficult to brew, save for the initial step, which was the well-known catch-phrase for the impossible: First, create a Philosopher's Stone.

"Very well," Snape agreed grudgingly. "The plan is to keep Quirrell here as long as possible. But what then? What if he wins through the defenses--he is devising one of them after all--and gives the stone to Voldemort?"

"He will not pass my last defense," Dumbledore said with confidence. "It is one of my cleverer ideas, and it is certain to baffle him. I believe

it will baffle him until Voldemort decides he has no further use for poor Quirinius."

"The Dark Lord will kill him," Snape said. "You used to show more mercy to His followers."

"Quirinius is doomed," Dumbledore declared sadly. "I wish it were not so, but there is nothing to be done. He is doomed, but others will survive, and Voldemort will never have the Elixir of Life."

"I don't suppose you would tell me what this infallible defense of yours is?"

Dumbledore leaned back and smiled. "I will tell you this: only one who does not want to use the Stone can get at it."

Harry blew out a breath, and looked at the enormous book in despair. There were eight hundred seventy pages of *Alchemist Supreme: the Life of Nicholas Flamel*, by Junia Kleopha Robbins.

Hermione had told him to look in the index, but there was no index. There was a table of contents to the thirty-eight chapters, but the titles were complicated and full of quotations, and gave the untutored Harry no clue as to what they were actually about. The only way he was going to find out what Albus Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel might have in common would be to actually read the book, page by page.

But it was a ridiculously long book. It made his wrists hurt to hold it for any length of time. He laid it in front of him on the library table, and prepared to plunge into the first chapter, *A Distant Mirror: Paris in the Fourteenth Century*.

"Psst! Harry!"

Happy to be distracted, Harry looked up and saw Draco in the library doorway, trying to get his attention. There was a card in Draco's hand and he was waving it at Harry.

"Oh, go see what he wants, Harry," said Susan. "It's better than being blown through the window by the force of your sighs."

Hannah and Sally giggled, and Harry made a face at them.

Draco was making tremendous gestures, and Harry hurried over, with an apologetic glance at Madam Pince.

"Well, what--"

Draco grabbed him by his robe and dragged him out into the hall. "I know who Nicholas Flamel is. I know what Fluffy's guarding."

"What? How?"

"My Famous Wizard Cards collection. I owed Mother. I told her I needed it."

"There's a Nicholas Flamel card?"

"Of course! Look!"

Harry took the card and studied it. The wizard in the picture did not look anywhere as old as Dumbledore. He had a clean-shaven, thin, unlined face, with a long nose and piercing grey eyes. Crystal-white hair flowed back from the austere brow and rippled to the man's high, starched collar. He looked back at Harry, and gave him a slight, amused smile.

NICHOLAS FLAMEL

ONLY KNOWN CREATOR OF THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The premier alchemist and noted opera lover Nicholas Flamel possesses the only Philosopher's Stone currently in existence. This stone's astonishing powers include transforming any metal into pure gold. It is also the essential ingredient in the Elixir of Life, which makes the drinker immortal. Grand Master Flamel, who celebrated

his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

Harry's jaw dropped. "The Philosopher's Stone? That must be it! That's what Hagrid took out of the vault! That's what Quirrell is after!"

"I told you! This is big, Harry! The Philosopher's Stone--well--it's the rarest, most valuable item in the entire world. People would kill for this--and they have. I knew I'd heard the name. That's why I had Mother owl me my entire card collection."

"I saw you getting a big box at breakfast. Why didn't you ask her to find the Flamel card and just send that?"

Draco gave him a shove, "Because, you wanker, she certainly knows who Nicholas Flamel is, and then she'd want to know what's going on, and then she'd tell Father, and he'd come here, and then we'd have to tell him everything before we're done investigating it ourselves! This is our mystery, and were going to solve it. And then everyone will be so incredibly impressed!"

"If you say so. All right, all right! Let's tell the others!"

"But they've got to swear to keep it a secret, Harry! If more people knew the Stone was at Hogwarts--"

"Yeah, I get it. This Nicholas Flamel must be the richest man in the world. He can turn anything into gold. That would come in handy sometimes."

Draco bit his lip. "It's not just the money, Harry. We have plenty of gold. It's immortality, Harry! The Elixir of Life is so powerful that you can live forever, and be young and healthy and strong the whole time! They say that it can even bring people back from the dead--if you don't wait too long to give it to them. It heals all sickness and wounds. Anybody would want the Philosopher's Stone, Harry. But since it also makes you rich, there's nothing you can really offer someone like Flamel to make you a Stone of your own."

He lowered his voice. "I think my grandfather talked to him once--he wanted Flamel to make him one. Offered him the moon, practically, but it was no go. Nobody has any leverage over Flamel, and his place in Devon must be really well protected, because I know a lot of people have tried to find it."

"Maybe he asked Dumbledore to keep it here because someone was after it!"

"Maybe." Draco looked doubtful. "But someone's always after it. It's the Philosopher's Stone!" He snickered. "Maybe Quirrell thinks it'll cure his stutter!"

"We've got to tell the others, Draco. They've got to know. It's only fair."

"Not the whole club, I hope," said Draco, looking horrified. "We don't know all that lot very well, and if they talked--"

"I've got to tell the other badgers," Harry insisted. "It would be really wrong if I didn't."

"It could be dangerous for them," Draco warned him. "If Quirrell is after the Stone, he might be capable of anything. I wouldn't tell Crabbe and Goyle. Those two couldn't protect themselves against a grown wizard. And those little girls---"

"Well-- Hermione and Neville have got to be told. They know half of it now, anyway. Hermione is smart, and she'll eventually figure it out the rest on her own, I reckon. We can tell our other friends when Quirrell's been sorted out."

"I daresay. Very well, let's meet in the club room right after dinner. I'll tell Granger. You tell Longbottom."

Harry thought Draco had the easier task. The Ravenclaws were largely uninterested in where Hermione Granger went after dinner, other than being rather relieved that she would be elsewhere.

Harry, on the other hand, had to listen to Zach Smith muttering about : "the dumping ground of Hogwarts" and "losers."

Giving him a quick, hostile look under his brows, Harry said calmly, "Don't feel so bad about losing all those points, Smith. I'm sure that the Explorers' Club members can make them up for you sometime this year."

Zach looked like he wanted to make something of it, but the older students nearby gave him no encouragement.

Harry asked Neville, "Could you come to the club room after dinner, Neville? We need to go over the plans for next Saturday."

Neville nodded, looking very thoughtful.

Dinner was torture for Harry. He hated deceiving his housemates. They were honest kids, who had been open and above-board with him. He felt ashamed of keeping dangerous secrets from them, but told himself it was safest for them. They knew to stay away from the third-floor corridor, at least.

And at the moment they were too interested in hearing about the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend to have time for lesser interests. Cedric was going for the first time, and had promised to bring each of them a souvenir.

Afterwards, Harry had to make up an excuse not to return to the Common Room with them. Ernie was teaching Justin to play wizards' chess, and Sally was going to meet with some older students to practice for Talent Night in October. Hannah and Susan were devising the tea for the next meeting, and would announce it when the plans were firmed up.

"We didn't finish lining up our programs this afternoon. Draco and I got talking with Hagrid and time got away from me. But he promised to come and tell about the Forbidden Forest some time. That should be neat."

"Give me an exact time when you'll be back in the Common Room," Cedric said. "Professor Sprout doesn't like the first years wandering the halls alone near curfew."

"I won't be wandering--"

Cedric's expression told Harry he was perilously close to sounding like a whinger.

Harry surrendered with a rueful smile. "Nine o'clock. Okay?"

"Okay--but if you're not there, I'll come after you."

Neville heard the story from Draco and Harry without interruption. Hermione had remarks enough for two people.

Most of them centered around her main point: they must tell a teacher immediately. The only real question was: who?

This led to some lively debate. Neville had instantly agreed with Hermione. It was ridiculous to imagine that four first years could fight the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, though Draco was not so sure that he and Harry couldn't take on "the stuttering idiot."

Then, too, the students all thought highly of their House Heads. In the end, they agreed that Professor Snape was indeed the best choice: not only because he was Harry's proxy guardian, but because he himself had witnessed something peculiar between Harry and Professor Quirrell.

"Has he said what might have caused you to faint, Harry?" Hermione asked, fascinated by the subject.

It had taken some time for her to accept that a teacher might be a danger to the students, but Professor Quirrell was such a very bad teacher, Hermione was not sure he deserved any defense. It made sense though, that a teacher planning something so nefarious would undermine his students' education as well.

"I did not faint!" Harry protested. "I only--blacked out--just for a little bit."

Hermione pursed her lips, and Draco grinned knowingly at Harry. Neville was still pondering the awfulness of approaching Professor Snape.

"Will we all have to go, Harry?" he quavered. "I don't think he likes me much."

"Oh, Neville, that's not true," Hermione put in. "He's very concerned that you do well. That's why he's paired the two of us up for the rest of term. You're already doing very much better!"

"He looks at me like I'm some sort of--flobberworm," Neville moaned. "I start working on a potion and he raises his eyebrow at me--yes, just like that, Draco!--and my mind goes blank and I make mistakes!"

"I'll talk to him," Harry promised, a little impatiently, wanting to get back to his sensational news. "Do you think we dare wait until Saturday? I have a regular time to see him in the afternoon."

A silence, as the students tried to work out if Quirrell might make for the Stone at any moment. Finally Hermione said judiciously, "I think you should talk to him as soon as you can, Harry. You can talk to him without raising any suspicion. We should see him right away. We don't want Professor Quirrell to try to steal the Stone before we can notify the proper authorities!"

Harry stood waiting outside Professor Snape's quarters, thinking about how they would lay out their discovery to him. Harry wasn't sure it was a good idea. Before this summer, he had never had much luck telling adults about his troubles, and no adult had actually done anything that would help him.

But Professor Snape was different, certainly. He had rescued Harry from the Dursleys. Harry had a beautiful room at Privet Drive now

thanks to him. Professor Snape had protected him and helped him, and shown him a brilliant new world. But what if the Professor was angry because Harry had gone where he wasn't supposed to be? Professor Snape had told him that whatever was going on with Professor Quirrell was none of his business, but Professor Snape didn't know the whole story!

Before he had a chance to change his mind, the Professor appeared before them. Harry swallowed nervously under the intense black gaze.

"Mr. Potter---Mr Malfoy. Miss Granger--and Mr Longbottom attempting to skulk behind her. Is there some problem?"

Harry and Draco looked at each other, and Harry shuffled, eyes on the floor. Hermione gave him an impatient little nudge.

"Professor--I know you told me not to worry about things, but we really think you need to know about something--"

Impulsively, Hermione burst out, "Professor--the Philosopher's Stone is here at Hogwarts!"

With this electric pronouncement, the students looked up beseechingly at Snape, who stared back them in shock.

Harry added, "That was what Hagrid took out of the vault that day we were at Diagon Alley. And Professor Quirrell is after it--we think," he faltered, seeing the look on Professor Snape's face.

"One moment," Snape said, and strode away, opening the door to his bedroom and slamming it behind him. He stood there some minutes, not knowing if he would burst out laughing or start tearing his hair. He took a deep breath, drew himself up, and stalked back out to hear what Harry and his companions had gotten themselves into.

Note: Some of you have remarked that Lucius Malfoy works for the Ministry, because after the fight with Arthur Weasley at Flourish & Blotts, he said "I'll see you at work." That is film canon, not in the books. It is clear to me that Lucius Malfoys career is being Lucius Malfoy. We know he has lots of money, but JKR really doesn't tell us

enough about the workings of the wizarding economy for us to know where it comes from. All sorts of conjectures are possible.

Silphium, by the way, was a real plant, now extinct, that provided the women of the ancient Mediterranean with a safe and convenient abortifacient.

And no, my computer is not any better. Once again, I'm borrowing time.

Chapter 29

After forcing himself into a semblance of calm and hearing the children out, Snape sat them down, gave them some of his excellent hot chocolate laced with a Calming Potion, and told them to say nothing to anyone of their conversation.

"I need to think about this," he said tersely.

"We need to do something!" Harry contradicted, a little wildly. "Professor Quirrell might be getting the Stone right now!"

"Drink your chocolate, Harry," Snape managed to make himself sound soothing. "I promise to give this my full attention. It would be impossible for Quirrell to get the Stone tonight or anytime soon. It is well-protected with a variety of safeguards, one of which was designed by myself."

"What kinds of safeguards?" Hermione and Draco asked simultaneously. They glared at each other, blushing.

"Ah," smirked Snape. "Great minds think alike, it seems. I am not going to tell you, for obvious reasons. The less you know about them, the safer the Stone is."

He waved his hand, dismissing their indignant protests. "Attempt to believe that you know less of magic than I. If Quirrell thought you knew about all the challenges, he might find a way to get the information unbeknownst to you." With a frown, he said slowly. "For that reason, I suggest that you make it a practice never to look Quirrell in the eye. Not directly."

"I don't, anyway," Harry agreed, enjoying his drink. "Whenever I look him in the eye it makes my scar hurt."

"Really?" Draco asked. "I didn't know that. Why do you suppose it does that?"

"Dunno. Have you figured anything out, Professor?"

He was too tired to lie. "Yes." Snape said. "And I don't want you to tell anyone else that bit of information, if you please. You lot," he said, fixing each student in turn with a black and menacing stare, "say nothing of it. Not to your housemates. Not," he said sternly to Draco, "to your parents. Tell no one." He noticed Neville's uneasy shuffling, and remarked caustically, "You're very quiet, Mr Longbottom. Would you care to share your thoughts?"

Neville glanced up at him and shook his head quickly.

"I insist," Snape said coldly.

"Well--" Neville ventured timidly, "there's a lot more here than meets the eye. My Gran always says that, but I reckon this time it's true."

"Five points to Gryffindor," Snape drawled. "Don't look so gobsmacked, Mr Longbottom. I am awarding you these points in order that you remember that you are absolutely right. It is immensely important that nothing gets out that could be of use to Quirrell."

Hermione wondered. "Why doesn't Professor Dumbledore just send him away?"

"Why do you think, Miss Granger?"

Draco squinted shrewdly over his cup. "Dumbledore wants to keep an eye on him. He wants to know what he's up to."

"But," Harry objected, "Professor Dumbledore wouldn't care what he's up to if he sent him away so he couldn't get the Stone."

"Whatever the reason," Snape told them, "it is of the greatest importance that you say nothing about any of this to anyone. Don't even think about it when Professor Quirrell is near."

It was on the tip of his tongue to include Dumbledore in his warning, but that might be too alarming to the children. Besides, Dumbledore was unlikely to come in contact with them. He was not exactly a "hands-on" Headmaster, at least in the sense of spending much time

with the students, other than at meals. Quirrell was a greater threat, and it was enough that the children be warned against him.

"I think it's time for all of you to be safely home in your Common Rooms. You look about to fall asleep." He took the cup that threatened to fall from Neville's relaxing grip, and said, "Do I have your promise not to divulge these very important secrets?"

They were alert at that, giving him eager assurances. Snape believed Longbottom, and the girl, too, for the most part. He had a feeling that Draco would keep his word unless he felt his father urgently needed to know something. And Harry--

He sighed, seeing the boy's thoughtful frown. Harry had so little experience trusting the adults in his life. Snape believed he had made real headway with the boy, but he sensed that if Harry thought for moment that Snape could not adequately protect the Stone or that he, Harry, was imperatively called upon to step in, there would be trouble. Serious trouble. Somehow he must allay Harry's anxieties, and he would not do it by patting the boy on the head and telling him that all was well. That would make Harry instantly suspicious that his concerns were being dismissed, and then he would cease to confide in Snape and simply go his own way. That could not be permitted to happen.

"I shall hold you all to your word. There is much at stake." Snape told them gravely. "And now, the hour is late. Talk about this amongst yourselves if you must, but be discreet. Do you all understand the word?"

A brief, indignant ruffling, and some rueful smiles. Snape hustled the children away, nodding impatiently at their thanks for the chocolate, giving Harry's shoulder an attempt at a reassuring squeeze. Slytherin and Hufflepuff were in different parts of the dungeons, but Harry and Draco were soon bound for their dormitories and some needed rest.

Longbottom gallantly declared that he would see Miss Granger safe to Ravenclaw Tower before returning to Gryffindor. Snape grunted

ironic approval, and watched them as they departed down the corridor. The Granger girl waved a farewell.

"Thank you, Professor Snape. Sleep well!"

Snape grunted again in response. He knew that sleep would be impossible for him until he dealt with the crisis at hand. He hurried back to his quarters, deep in thought. As soon as the door closed, Snape stalked over to his fireplace.

"Minerva!"

"Less than three weeks, Minerva," Snape hissed, his robe whipping around him as he paced her quarters. "Less than three weeks into term and a quartet of first years has not only deduced the presence of the Philosopher's Stone, but they have divined that Quirrell is a threat to it."

"They came to you?"

"Indeed they did--their innocent little faces full of concern for my adult stupidity. I was informed of the presence of the Stone. I was informed that Professor Quirrell is not what he seems to be. I was further informed that the threat on the third floor corridor is a Cerberus named Fluffy, which is guarding a trapdoor, presumably the door that leads to the Stone. Less than three weeks."

"What did you say to them?" Under her breath, she muttered, "Fluffy?"

"I told them part of the truth. What else is to be done? I suppose I could obliviate them--and Dumbledore might prefer that solution, but that would not prevent them coming to the same conclusion eventually, and I do not wish to obliviate Harry. Obliviations are dangerous, and never work exactly as they are supposed to. I think what we will have to do is accept that these children know something of what is going on, and include them in our plans."

"But the danger, Severus! A Cerberus on the third floor. It's a wonder the Weasley twins haven't already been devoured!"

"They are in danger anyway, because of Dumbledore's mad scheme." He sneered. "Hagrid must have been enchanted to have an excuse to foist such a monster on Hogwarts."

"Sometimes I wonder about him, too." Minerva agreed. "A Cerberus! I think I have something about them here." She studied the contents of her bookshelves, and pulled out a heavy volume. Taking it over to her desk, she paged through it, murmuring, "Calypso--Centaur--Cerberus! There's quite a bit here," she told Snape cheerfully. "They're fond of music. Did you know that?"

Snape refused to admit that he did not. He had actually never seen a Cerberus himself, and was rather curious about it.

"Perhaps it would be just as well if you did not lend that volume to Quirrell."

"I never lend books," she answered absently. "You know that. Not even to Albus. Especially not to Albus."

Snape smirked. One Christmas, after a few drinks, Minerva had told the story of her precious copy of the Ogham Book of Ballymore, its pages stuck together with a vile yellow substance that Minerva suspected was melted lemon sherbets.

The runic connection struck him. Perhaps this was the right moment to see if he could surprise her. He said, "Speaking of Ancient Runes, Lucius Malfoy is quite impressed that Harry's scar is in the shape of a Rune--Sygel, I think he said. He called Harry a Child of Destiny. Pompous arse. I'm surprised you hadn't noticed it."

Minerva said nothing, but pursed her lips and peered at him inscrutably over the rims of her spectacles.

Snape's voice rose slightly. "Am I to surmise that you did notice the significance of Harry's scar, but have chosen not to give me this bit of useful information?"

Minerva shook her head. "It's really not something of which I could speak freely--"

"Oh, sod your super-secret witch lore!"

"Watch your tongue with me, my lad!" Minerva snapped back. "It would have been just as well if no one had spotted that Harry's scar was a rune, but now that you know, you can see that news of it would hardly make Harry's life easier."

"Especially that particular rune, I take it!"

"Yes," she said shortly. "It's a powerful sign, but it's open to all sort of interpretations."

"Well," Snape said dryly, "Lucius Malfoy has interpreted it to mean that Harry Potter is destined to be the Next Big Thing. The Dark Lord is so very out-of date--so--so--Eighties."

Minerva actually cackled. "Well, that's one problem solved. No wonder Harry spends so much time with Draco Malfoy. I would have thought Draco would put him off, but the boy is behaving better than I expected. Harry's mother's protection seems to have wider implications than I would have dreamed."

"It's not perfect, though," Snape told her.

On impulse, he decided to confide in Minerva. With her knowledge of Old Magic, she might have some helpful insights. "Something was left over that night. I need to tell you something very serious about Harry, and I must have your word that you will not tell Albus. He might take it very badly."

After a moment's thought, Minerva gave her word, waiting in suspense. Snape did not see any reason to dance away from the truth.

"Harry's scar is tainted with Dark Magic. Though that rune of Lucius--and yours--might have sealed it in, it's leaked a bit."

"Dark Magic from the Killing Curse?"

"Possibly. As you can imagine, it's a unique situation. Have you ever heard of a--horcrux?"

Minerva frowned, searching her memory. She shook her head.

Heavily, Snape continued, "It's the foulest of Dark Magic. There is little written about it, but my understanding is that a wizard seeking immortality tears off a shred of his soul during a murder ritual and deposits it in a receptacle of some sort. As long as the soul shard is safe, the wizard cannot be truly killed."

"Oh!" Minerva said, her brow clearing, "Like Koshchei the Deathless! I remember that old legend. The needle in the egg and the egg in the sparrow--or whatever it was. What has that to do with Harry?"

"I think that the bit of Dark Magic in Harry's scar is in fact a piece of the Dark Lord's soul."

Minerva gasped, her mouth open like a fish.

Then she scowled and answered back with fierce indignation. "I don't believe it! Harry is nothing like that--that--"

"I didn't say he was! The shard is sealed away for the most part, but there is evidence that it relates to the Dark Lord."

"All right." She poured a whisky for herself and another for Snape and sat down, her jaw set to endure the bad news. "What evidence?"

"Harry is a parselmouth."

Minerva looked at him in amazement. "And just when were you planning on sharing that bit of news? How dare you accuse me of keeping secrets? Have you witnessed this?"

"No. The boy told me himself, quite innocently, when we first met. It was one of the ways he understood that he had magical powers. A

story about chatting up a snake at the zoo one day. I simply cautioned him to keep that to himself. I've never asked him to show me this ability--" he considered the matter "--though perhaps I should."

"Perhaps you should!" Minerva rejoined tartly. "I'll believe it when I see it. What else do you have that isn't hearsay?"

"Something very serious indeed. All right. When he met Quirrell at the Leaky Cauldron, as I told you, Harry clutched his scar and fainted."

"But that might mean--"

"--And," Snape interrupted her, "I did not tell you at the time, but when I touched Harry's scar, I felt a--tingle--in my Dark Mark."

There was a long silence, broken only by the crackling of the fire and the sound of glass against wood after Minerva downed her whisky in a single swallow. She poured herself another. Finally, she said, "Do you think he meant to do it?"

"No. I don't think he meant to give Harry a bit of himself at all. It doesn't make sense to me. It is possible, however, that he went to the Potters that night with the intention of using their murders to create a horcrux. There--was a prophecy about the Dark Lord, and that he was in danger from a child born in the seventh month."

He studied Minerva's startled expression. After a moment it changed to one of sudden illumination. She sighed as if understanding something for the first time.

Grimly, she only said, "Go on."

"The Dark Lord believed that the child was Harry. Albus obviously believes it, too. It fits, as far as I know, since I only know the first two lines."

"--which are--?" she inquired with hint of acid.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..."

"What thundering rubbish!" Minerva hissed under her breath. "All this fash for a prophecy!"

"But it does fit, I'm afraid. He would have taken real joy in using a child of prophecy as a tool to give himself immortality. He must have brought an object with him to bespell, but we may never know what that was. Apparently, the ritual went wrong--it is obviously a very difficult one--and the Dark Lord was destroyed and the shard he intended for the horcrux went awry and hit the boy. His mother's protection saved the child from both Killing Curse and largely from the soul shard, locking it away and sealing it with that rune. Nonetheless, a horcrux of a sort was created, and it kept the Dark Lord's soul from moving on. That's one scenario I've come up with. I've also considered that it was completely an accident and that the Dark Lord's soul was already compromised by his many murders."

"--And his soul fell to bits, with a portion hitting Harry and the rest slinking off to plot his return," Minerva finished impatiently. "I don't find that convincing. It's too convenient. That horrible creature was all about grand schemes. I can well imagine him dreaming up something so disgusting--making use of a child's death! But he wasn't as clever as he fancied himself!" she added tartly. She thought a little longer. "If Albus is right, and he's trying to find a way back, do you think he knows about Harry--about that bit of soul, I mean?"

Snape shuddered. The thought made him ill. "I really, really, hope not. I see no reason to believe so. If Harry were connected to the Dark Lord's consciousness, he would have had dreams, visions--perhaps direct contact. He has told me nothing of the sort. His behavior in no way resembles the Dark Lord's. There is only the tenuous connection between the Dark Lord's mark and his scar. And his discomfort in the presence of Quirrell--specifically when Quirrell looks in his eyes. Which could mean--"

He stopped. What it truly meant became clear to him at last, inescapably logical. Minerva looked up at him, pale and frightened. He suspected he looked rather frightened himself.

"You don't think--" Minerva whispered. "He's here? That monster is here and he's teaching the children!"

"You'd think he'd be a better Defense teacher," Snape muttered bitterly.

"Is that Quirinius at all? Could it be--"

"This is--extraordinary," Snape said, shaking his head. "I believe it's a genuine possession. Some of Quirinius is still there, but somehow the Dark Lord has got his claws into him."

"Could the fact he made this--horcrux--explain it? How a soul can survive and inhabit another's body?" She thought a little more, and asked, "Can Quirinius be saved?"

"Albus thinks not. I did not understand earlier when we were speaking of Quirrell that Albus has already determined that it is a case of possession. He must believe it to be a voluntary one. He spoke of Quirrell as doomed."

Minerva lurched to her feet, hands twitching, "Looking very sad, and shaking his head more in sorrow than anger, I'll warrant! Well, I won't believe it until I see proof of it for myself! How does he know it was voluntary? Was he there?" She bustled back and forth, thinking hard. "Look here, Severus: there's work to be done! We must get that creature out of Quirinius--out of Hogwarts--out of Harry!--out of the world! What is Albus thinking? Has he gone senile? Is he asleep?"

Snape was thinking himself. "He mentioned a plan to contain the Dark Lord. It must have something to do with those defenses we've been putting together."

"Well, you and I are going to have a hard look at those so-called 'defenses.' Albus can't be serious! A chess-game? What use it that?"

"A chess-game?" Snape asked, distracted. "I made a logic puzzle." Seeing her fuming, he said, "Albus spoke of keeping the Dark Lord's attention fixed on the Stone rather than going off and rallying his old followers--and perhaps finding other--more practical-- ways to regain his form."

Minerva looked at herself in her mirror, her face bleak. She was casting off the most central tenet of her life: her reliance on Albus Dumbledore. "Is the Stone he showed us even real? Is that just a game as well? Is this all smoke and mirrors with nothing solid to depend upon?"

"I don't know. We'll find out. I agree that we should have a look at Albus' vaunted defenses, starting with Fluffy. We'll have to be discreet."

"Of course. And we must keep the children safe, above all. No matter how brilliant Albus fancies his schemes, " she added, utterly disillusioned.

Snape bade her goodnight. Minerva had not moved, but was still studying herself in the mirror, as if looking for answers. Snape knew she needed time to think, and left without another word.

He went immediately to his desk, readied a quill, and began writing a letter. How often had he dreamed of a scholarly correspondence with this great man! He had not, however, imagined writing on such a subject, or with such a grim purpose.

Worthy Grand Master Flamel,

I am the Potions Master of Hogwarts, where the extraordinary item of your devising may be in more danger--and a greater danger to others-- than perhaps our Headmaster has led you to believe. Having heard of your love of privacy, I would not force my acquaintance upon you were the situation not of the gravest nature...

"--and a bar of Honeyduke's Finest for each of my favourite firsties," Cedric said, doling out the precious treats at the Hufflepuff table.

"You're the best, Cedric!" Justin said, busily unwrapping his own keepsake of Hogsmeade village.

A flurry of heartfelt thanks followed, and then ecstatic moans.

"So tell us about Hogsmeade, Cedric," said Harry. "What's it like, really?"

Cedric nibbled a licorice whip. "Like any other village, I suppose." He smiled mischievously. "That is, if it's an all-magical village."

"And that means it's unique," Sally nodded, breaking off a small piece of her chocolate bar. "What?" she asked Hannah. "I'm going to save the rest for later. Anyhow--I want to know about all the shops. I hear there's a tearoom there, kept by a witch, where students go on dates--"

"Madam Puddifoot's," Ernie groaned. "Oh, spare us!"

"I passed by it," Cedric admitted. "It's very--pink."

"So you passed by it--quickly, I hope," said Justin. "And then you moved on to greener pastures."

"There's a splendid quidditch shop, where I found a better pair of gloves. A bookshop, a stationer's--all the sorts of things a village hard by a school would want to stock. Two pubs. The Three Broomsticks is the one to go to."

"Is it much like the Leaky Cauldron?" Harry asked. The Leaky Cauldron was the only pub he had ever visited, and thus the yardstick by which he measured all others.

Cedric frowned. "Nicer, I'd say. Cozier. Much cleaner. Madam Rosmerta, who owns the place, is a quite a looker. It's a place for wizards and witches and nobody else. It feels--I don't know--safe.

You know how just about anybody might stroll up to the bar at the Leaky Cauldron--hags, dark wizards--even muggles, now and then"

The six first-year Hufflepuffs nodded gravely, even though this was news to most of them.

"Maybe it's just London itself," Cedric mused, half to himself. "There's an edge about the Leaky Cauldron. It's a strange place: anything could happen. There's a bit of danger in the air. It's not a bit like that at the Three Broomsticks. It's hard to imagine anything bad happening there. And the butterbeer is first-rate!"

"I heard about the other pub in Hogsmeade," Susan sniffed. "The Hog's Head. Auntie says that place is dodgy enough!"

"Could be, I reckon. I didn't stop. Saw the fellow who runs the place, though, and he is a strange sort, if you like."

"Did you see the Shrieking Shack?" Hannah asked. She told Sally, "It's supposed to be the most haunted place in Britain. It's creepy and dilapidated, and I heard that if you get too close, you hear the most horrible screams."

"It was a right shambles," Cedric agreed. "I didn't hear any screaming, mind you."

"I can't believe we have to wait a whole two years until we can go to Hogsmeade." Susan said indignantly. "I think it's just wicked to tantalise us so!"

"At least we have the Explorers' meeting to look forward to," Ernie comforted her. "What's for tea tomorrow, Susan?"

"I thought we'd have something that went along with the farm theme," Susan told them, her face brightening. "Pasties and Devonshire splits, Farmhouse Fruitcake, and the little biscuits they make in Tinworth called Goblins' Gold."

Ernie was pleased to display his knowledge. For the edification of the muggle-raised, he explained. "Obviously, they're not really made of

gold. They're very crisp, though, and very cheesy. It's the cheese that gives them their yellow colour."

Cedric turned a mock-sowl on Susan. In a high, very Susanish voice, he complained, "I think its just wicked to tantalise a poor, deprived third-year so!"

Susan made a face at him. Hannah said eagerly, "You should come to a meeting and give a presentation. Hagrid's going to give one, so why shouldn't you? You could talk about quidditch!"

Cedric thought about it. "I could tell you about the World Cup," he considered. "The last one was in Spain. Quite a lark, meeting wizards and witches from all over the world. I still have the pictures and some of the things I bought."

"Sounds like fun," Justin said, "I went to the Olympics in Korea. It was like the whole world was there."

Then he had to explain the Olympics to the wizardborn, who were amazed at the variety of events presented.

"Like a World Cup and a dueling competition and flying races all in one!" Ernie said. "I wouldn't know what to look at first. Do they have these Olympics often?"

There was more talk. Eventually, Cedric had to go to practice, and once he was out of sight Susan immediately asked Harry, "Have you found out anything more about that thing?"

"What thing?" Harry teased.

She poked him. "You know. That thing on the third floor!"

Everyone craned in as Harry spoke softly. "I did find out a bit about it. Stay far away from there: it's dangerous. I had to tell Professor Snape about it. He said it's a very important secret and that we mustn't talk to anyone about it, and that we shouldn't even think about it. He's working on it."

"Well, then," Hannah said comfortably, "there you are. Nothing for us to worry about."

"I suppose so," Susan worried, "but some people are so nosy and careless. If anyone were to be hurt--"

"Nobody's going to get hurt as long as they don't go anywhere near there," Harry said firmly. "If we see anyone headed there, we should stop them."

"Unless they're a professor," Ernie added practically.

"Right," Harry agreed. "Unless they're a professor." And then Ill just watch them, he decided to himself. Very carefully.

Note: Due to a lengthy business trip, I may not be able to post next Sunday. I will, however, post as soon thereafter as possible.

Chapter 30

Between them, Snape and McGonagall raised enough questions about the safety of the Stone that Dumbledore suggested that they test the defenses for themselves. They had not told him what the children had discovered, but they said enough that the headmaster understood he could not dismiss their concerns without some concrete reassurances.

"Go this Friday evening, if you like. I'll see that everything is in place."

"Everything ought to be in place already," Minerva pointed out.

Dumbledore smiled faintly. "It will all be ready when needed. I think it will set your minds at rest to see how very thoroughly the Stone is defended against those who would steal it for themselves."

"The Cerberus must be just through these doors," Minerva speculated. She felt carefully in her right pocket for the tiny object.

"Just as long as you don't require me to sing," Snape grunted.

"But Severus," Minerva protested, a glint in her eye, "You have a lovely voice! I shall never forget that Christmas when you and Albus and Elphias Doge regaled us with The Wintersday Carol."

"I have not drunk a half a bottle of firewhisky at a sitting since, and thus I'm not singing," Snape said grimly. "If that's your plan, you can just--"

"Shhh!" she hushed him.

Though the narrow crack she tossed a little gold box with a whispered charm. The glittering cube spun rapidly, six feet above the stone floor. There was a growl and a tentative snap, and the rattling of chains as the beast crept forward.

With a faint smile, Minerva pointed to a corner, and murmured "Engorgio! Harmonia mysteria!"

Snape started as an organ's high, reedy sonority spilled out of the room. The opening figure was repeated, going down, octave by octave, to the lowest vibrating register, and then worked its way up in a massive arpeggio. At the top, ominous minor chords crashed out. The Cerberus flinched, all six eyes bulging. A pause, and then the chords broke into sonic filigree, fluttering and fluting.

Snape peered around the door. A pipe organ had installed itself in a corner of the room. The Cerberus was transfixed by the sounds, standing rigid with fascination. Snape glanced back at Minerva, who was nodding with satisfaction. The organ played on, and gradually the Cerberus subsided into blissful, drooling, snoring sleep.

"The Toccata and Fugue in d minor?" Snape asked. "Isn't that a bit of overkill?"

"If a thing's worth doing--"

"Oh, spare me!"

Snape edged past the massive bulk, nose twitching at the odor of the creature's breath. Minerva appeared quite at her ease, and trotted ahead, raising the trapdoor with a wave of her wand. She looked down, her brow knitting in thought. Snape looked over her shoulder. Darkness yawned below them. There were neither steps nor ladder. There was not even a hint of where the bottom might be. Minerva glanced about and summoned a handful of straw. With a whisper, an ethereal spiral staircase assembled itself.

Snape waved her ahead. "Age before beauty."

She only smiled. "Pearls before swine."

She stepped onto a riser, which circled downwards like a leaf in a whirlpool. Snape was on another riser himself in a moment, his wand out and a bright "Lumos" reflecting on stone. Above them the sounds of the organ echoed more and more faintly. There was a faint "thump,"

and the staircase was stopped by something soft. Their lighted wands showed clearly what was under their feet.

"Ah, Pomona!" Snape sighed. "Devils Snare."

Instantly he called forth an intense light, and the branches slithered away out of their path.

"Not a very daunting barrier," Minerva sniffed, "Pomona must have been afraid of hurting someone."

"I daresay it would stop a first year," Snape sneered. "Or a muggle."

A stone passageway loomed ahead, sloping downwards, and they moved along it, listening for any threats. There was only the trickle of water, a faint thread of organ music, and the distant whisper of a draught in the hall. Not too much farther on, the passage opened into a brilliantly lit room, its ceiling arching high above them.

It was full of small, jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling as they flew about the room. On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy wooden door with a massive bronze handle and lock.

"Very pretty," Minerva said, with a nod to the birds. "Obviously Filius' work."

"Do you think he was down here?" Snape wondered.

"Well, I wasn't," Minerva pointed out. "I merely gave a template--actually a shrunken version of the real barrier. I daresay Filius made something similar, and Albus installed it. Yes, very pretty--"

Snape eyed the birds warily. "They don't look dangerous, but perhaps it would be best to be prepared."

He let Minerva move ahead, while he watched the birds, his wand out to defend them both if necessary. On the other side of the room, Minerva attempted to charm the door open, but with no success.

"That's odd." She spoke another command, more sharply this time.

Snape was studying the glittering little birds. His eyes roamed the chamber for anything hazardous and stopped at the sight of "Broomsticks!" he said. "What do you suppose--?"

His eyes followed the birds and then he understood.

"Keys!"

"What?"

"They're not birds, they're keys!"

"Oh! Very clever. Well done, Severus. So they are. We must simply summon the key to this door. Accio!"

Nothing happened. Minerva huffed with annoyance. "Bespelled to resist a general summoning. There's nothing for it, then."

She summoned a broomstick instead, and was in the air in a flash.

"Gryffindors," Snape muttered.

He hated using a broomstick. He had never been any good as a boy, and had learned some measure of skill by hard, unrelenting work. It had never been "fun" for him. Nonetheless, everyone else, from the Malfoys to Minerva McGonagall, was mad over broomsticks. Snape launched himself after the Deputy Headmistress with hardly a moment's hesitation.

He hissed as a swarm of the winged menaces buzzed around him. One tangled in his hair. Snape grabbed at it and threw it away, wincing. They wove through a whirl of rainbow feathers. How was he to know which one they needed?

"There!" shouted Minerva, pointing ahead, "The big one with bright blue feathers! It matches the size of the lock!"

Trying to locate the one out of the many proved difficult. They caught keys with yellow feathers, keys with green feathers, and then, as they

grew more crafty, keys with feathers of baby blue and teal and indigo. Snape glimpsed their quarry for a moment, and nearly had it. It got away from them, speeding ahead, vanishing in a cloud of its brethren.

McGonagall soared up, trying to look at the situation from above. Snape doggedly twisted through the mass of them, wishing he had tied his hair back. Minerva gave a shriek of triumph and dove. Feathers spiraled crazily around her, and suddenly she was nearly on Snape. Surprised, he tried to get out of her way, and was startled to feel her hand brush his back.

"Got it!" she cried. "It was sitting bold as you please on the back of your robes!"

The key fluttered defiantly in her grasp. "None of that, now," she chided it.

She landed gracefully, and walked quickly to the door. Snape was behind, wand out. Minerva turned the key in the lock and the door swung open on darkness.

As they stepped through, light flooded the room, and they found themselves on the edge of huge chessboard, on the black side. The chessmen were taller than they. Opposing them, far away across the black-and-white floor, were the white pieces. Snape was impressed at the monumental scale.

"Your work, then?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, looking about with pleasure. "Very nice, if I say so myself. Bespelled to play a good game, too."

"Shall I take a nap while you play against yourself?"

"What nonsense!" Minerva flicked her wand and murmured a password, and the entire board floated up to the ceiling. "We haven't time for games. Come along, Severus."

He followed along behind her, glancing up warily at the massive stone square over their heads. They reached the far side and Minerva turned and flicked her wand again.

The chessboard descended behind them, very slowly, and crunched into repose, just as it had been a moment before. Not even the knights' swords quivered.

Quirrell was a fairly good chess player. I have no idea about the Dark Lord, Snape mused. It was impossible to imagine the Dark Lord playing a game. Snape had never seen him require recreation of any kind--unless one considered torture and murder recreation. There had always been an inhuman quality there--or perhaps it was more accurate to say a lack of human qualities. Now that he knew what the Dark Lord was willing to do to himself, it was easy in retrospect to perceive his--incompleteness. He was, quite literally, not all there. It explained so much, and it made Snape feel like a great fool not to have seen it before.

Another passageway. Snape sighed. He pushed the door open for Minerva.

Something was waiting for them on the other side.

Crash!

An immense club slammed into the wall, inches from Minerva's head. She ducked out of the way, gasping, her wand tracking the threat. Snape pushed forward, his nostrils full of the reek of troll.

"Stupefy," he roared, and heard Minerva's simultaneous hex.

A hideously comical look of astonishment, as the troll's jaw dropped open, it sagged to its knees, and then keeled over onto its face. There was a crunch. Snape's nose twitched in sympathy.

"Quirinius' challenge, I believe," Minerva considered, dusting off her robes. "He's always said he had a way with them."

Snape only snorted. Of all the things on Earth to boast of, "I have a way with trolls," had always struck him as rather pathetic. If Quirrell had used it as a pick-up line with witches, he was definitely stupid enough to let himself be possessed by the Dark Lord.

"Another creature that has no business in Hogwarts," Minerva muttered to herself. "This is intolerable!"

Another door was before them, and they opened it slowly, their wands ready for any more unpleasant surprises. Inside the chamber, Snape recognized the challenge at once.

"It's mine," he told Minerva. "Come on."

They stepped over the threshold, and immediately the doorway was filled with purple flames. Minerva started and then looked at the next doorway, where black flames had sprung up, barring the way. Snape was very proud of these flames. The purple had been a secret joke, based on Dumbledore's insufferable finery. The black flames had been difficult to perfect, but they were extremely impressive in this setting. He led Minerva to the table in the center of the room: a table where seven differently-shaped bottles were waiting. He smirked at her.

"Potions!" she muttered, "Why does it have to be Potions?"

She picked up the roll of parchment by the bottles and read the puzzle. "A poet, too! Who would have imagined? Did Albus write this?"

"He did not!" Snape answered, a little hotly. "He absolutely did not! I wrote it all myself, brewed all the potions, charmed the flames. I did it all myself, and no one helped me!"

Minerva studied the puzzle again, and said under breath, "We really, really, do not have time for games!"

"You don't know the answer, do you?" Snape asked smugly.

She narrowed her eyes at him, rather vexed. "In time, I've no doubt I could reason it out. I did not require you to play my game. In courtesy, I expect not to be obliged to play yours."

"Oh, very well." Still smirking, he passed her the smallest bottle. "A swallow will do."

She swallowed, after a wary glance at him. "Not bad at all."

"My own creation. Hagrid found that the blackberries were especially good this year." He took a swallow himself. "Quite acceptable, if I say so myself. Two of the other bottles hold some nettle wine--also of my own making. It's not bad either."

The black flames died down with a whisper.

"And now, let's see what Albus has concocted for the grand finale."

It was a high, but not particularly large chamber: windowless, and lit by ever-burning candles in tall candelabra of black wrought iron. There was only one other furnishing in the room: a tall cheval looking-glass propped against the far wall. Very tall indeed, taller than Snape himself, it stood on two clawed feet of bronze ormolu, and the frame was an ornate work of carving and gold leaf, gleaming richly in the mellow light. Around the top of the frame was an inscription, incised in clear but ancient characters: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

"Have you seen this before?" Snape asked.

"Never." Minerva moved closer, her lips moving as she sounded out the strange words. "What language is that? None that I know--but perhaps--"

"Yes" Snape agreed "I believe it's--"

He stopped, stunned and transfixed by the reflection. He was not alone--nor was he standing beside Minerva McGonagall.

Lily was holding his hand.

His heart leaped with joy and dread. She was there beside him: alive, beautiful, unchanged by the years. Her bright hair moved with an unseen breeze. Her dimples flashed in a lovely smile. Harry was there too, smiling. And his. It was the same Harry, too. Perhaps the hair was slightly straighter, the nose a thought longer, but it was certainly Harry. It was also undeniably Harry Snape, not Harry Potter.

How was this possible? Lily is dead.

Snape moved closer to the mirror, his eyes drinking in the changing visions greedily. He had found the Philosopher's Stone. It was right there, right there in the mirror. It was his for the taking...

He is brewing the Elixir of Life, there in the dungeons. It is perfectly real: Snape is following the well-known steps, approving of the care he is taking with the stirring and the judicious adding of the phoenix tears at the critical moment. Time-consuming, certainly, but not the most difficult potion he has ever brewed.

The next step is more complicated. He is sneaking out of Hogwarts with the potions, saying nothing to anyone. He is apparating to Godric's Hollow, to the cemetery of the kissing gate and the admirable old church, to the stone of white marble, to the grave of James and Lily Potter. He will destroy the last enemy, which is Death.

Removing the earth poses no problem for him at all. He has used a digging charm for years, retrieving curious roots, capturing burrowing insects for ingredients. Never on this scale, of course, but it is going well: the layer of sod removed neatly and set aside, the pile of earth growing taller. Snape puts more power into the charm and the pile grows faster, the yawning hole before him grows deeper. Such things take time, but he has all the time in the world to rescue Lily.

A smooth surface is emerging. The wood of her coffin, still shining, its varnished wood charmed impervious to the elements. All the earth is whisked away, and the coffin levitated up, up, up into the living world. Snape can see the edge of the other coffin in the grave and sneers. For James Potter, there will be no resurrection.

There are wards and charms to protect the dead. They pose no barrier to Snape, whose intentions are the purest. He clenches his jaw, knowing that the next few moments will be painful--yes--very painful and distressing, but they must be borne, and then the world will be changed.

The coffin lid is removed, and set gently aside. Lily is under the Sun once more.

She is still Lily yet. Her hair is as bright as ever. The dark yellow parchment-like skin has shrunk taut, her lips are black and withered. Her jaw has dropped open, turning her lovely smile into a macabre grin. The eyes are sunken far back into the skull. Preservation charms can only do so much, alas. The stink of decay is faint after eleven years, but it has permeated the inside of the coffin. She is an object of fear and horror, but she is still Lily.

Snape kneels by the side of the coffin, and pours the Elixir over the strong, white teeth, down into her throat, and waits.

The process is slow. Snape waits at the side of the coffin, while the sun moves across the sky. His knees are aching, and he shifts to a more comfortable position. This task will require all his patience.

The skin changes first, almost imperceptibly. Yes, the color is changing. Her hands, too: the claw-like fingers are swelling slightly, as natural fluids fill the tissues. Her eyes--how had he not noticed? --are changing, too, as the lids rise up in their sockets, supported by the resurgent eyes. The lips are plumping and turning rosy, the cheeks filling out, the whole body-- Did her finger move?

Snape watches the hands for what might be hours, waiting for another hint of life. He casts a cleaning charm, and then a refreshing charm on Lily's robes. She must not be distressed by the smell of death. Was that a breath he heard? He glances up to see her eyelashes fluttering slightly. Her breast is moving now, a slight rise and fall. It takes time for the Elixir to rebuild and reconstruct, but it is infallible.

It is dawn at last: a ravishing sight. The clouds in the east are radiant peach and apricot, lined with silver and lilac and primrose. The light is soft, tender, even. And Lily opens her eyes.

"Severus?" He smiles down at her, love filling his heart to bursting. She smiles back.

"You've saved me. I thought I was dead. It was all darkness and confusion. I couldn't find a way out. Where is Harry?"

"Harry is at Hogwarts and safe. We will go there now and see him."

"Oh, yes! Take me to Hogwarts," she whispers. "Take me home."

Under the glorious colours of the rising sun, he takes her in his arms, and lifts her from the coffin. They embrace. Lily is kissing him: a perfect kiss. The vanquished coffin is vanished, the earth spelled back into the waiting cavity with a word, the sod laid seamlessly down. With another word, Lily's name disappears from the white marble. Lily takes his arm, without a backward glance at the grave, and they whirl away from this place forever.

Hogwarts welcomes them. They are at home in the dungeons. They are married in a flash of white and black and joy. They have always been married. Harry visits them in their quarters, as he has since he started regular studies at the school. Life is perfect, and has always been perfect. He will live with Lily for always and always...

A shoulder jostled against his arm. It was not Lily. Snape frowned, the thread of daily reality disturbed.

Lily is speaking to him

Another interruption.

Snape scowled. This was most unwelcome. He turned to rebuke the interloper.

"Professor McGonagall? I did not hear you come in."

Minerva stared at him wildly, blue eyes red-rimmed.

"Severus? What are you doing here?"

Snape looked about him in confusion. They were in a windowless stone chamber, lit by candles, in front of a mirror --where Lily stands waiting.

"Severus?" Minerva gasped. Her hands went to her face, and she glanced fearfully at the mirror. "How long have we been here?"

He swayed, dizzy and disoriented. No--I've got to get back to Lily--

A lurch, and he stumbled against Minerva, knocking them both to the stone floor. She cried out in alarm and pain. Snape clutched at his elbow, grunting with the discomfort of tingling nerves.

"Lies," Minerva moaned. "All lies."

Lies. Snape gathered the shreds of reality about him, trembling with grief:--with devastating loss--boundless sorrow. Lily had died to him once more, and this new passing was fresh and raw. He crawled to the wall and sat with his back to it, feeling as empty as a discarded cauldron.

He dared not look at the mirror, but longed to. Just another glance--the last--

"Severus," Minerva croaked, on her hands and knees. "We've got to get out of here. Don't look! Whatever it's showing you is a lie. It wants us to stay here forever and ever"

--Always and always.

He could not hear Mirror-Lily, but saw her mouth the words, smiling.

Minerva caught at his face, and made him look at her. "--until we die."

Why was Minerva talking? He wanted to see Lily again. He wanted to see himself too: young, happy--almost handsome. That was the true reality--this was some terrible caricature of life.

Minerva's face was wet with tears. No! She was in front of the mirror.

And then she slapped him. Hard.

"Severus. It's a lie, whatever you saw. A filthy, mocking lie."

She hit him again, and he realized that he was weeping, too.

"Now get up. We're going to turn to the door and we're going to walk out of here."

They helped each other struggle up, their limbs stiff from too many hours in front of the mirror. Minerva nearly fell again, and Snape grabbed her arm and helped her out of the room. He thought of Lily, waiting...

He took a deep breath, and forced himself to walk on.

"What did you see, Minerva?" A silence.

"Never ask me." she hissed. "Never ask me!"

They made their weary way back through the labyrinth without further speech.

Her quarters were closer. Snape felt he could not move another step when they entered. He threw himself into an armchair gratefully, wondering if he would fall asleep right there.

"I'd offer you whisky, but it's nearly daylight," Minerva told him. "You will have to make do with tea."

It was hot and strong and it helped. Snape swallowed it down, surprised at how thirsty he was, not even daring to think about potions. Tea was honest. Tea was safe.

"So now we know," he said.

"Yes," she said, after setting down her cup. "We know how Albus plans to trap the monster. I'm not sure it's a perfect trap, but it nearly got me. If I had been alone--"

He gave a sharp nod. "Luckily we were together. I would have happily spent the rest of my life there."

"Don't!" she protested. "Don't think about it! If it weren't for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, I would destroy that cursed thing today. 'I show not your face but your heart's desire.' What a monstrous thing to keep here in the school! What if a student were to find it?"

"It might not be so dangerous for a student," Snape considered. "Presumably, a student would have less to regret, and their heart's desire, whatever it might be, would be less absorbing."

"You and I know," she responded tartly, "that our students don't have the perfectly blissful lives that Albus imagines them to have."

He sighed, imagining what Harry might see reflected. He felt a brief, poignant pang of grief for the lost Harry Snape of the mirror. Oh, my boy, my boy. Quite a wonderful lad.

"As you say," he agreed, clearing his throat. "It's not the perfect trap. If there were any distractions, or another person in the chamber, he might be drawn away. Besides, if he remained there long enough, Quirrell would die, and presumably the Dark Lord's spirit would be released. Does Albus imagine that it would seek to enter the Mirror?"

"It's--possible." She blew out a breath. "The Stone is clearly in there--somehow. Very clever of Albus."

"I suppose. Is it clever enough?"

Chapter 31

Dumbledore was smug and unsurprised that Snape had been unable to lay hands on the Philosopher's Stone. However, he was both surprised and disappointed that Minerva McGonagall had failed.

She stared back at him unflinchingly. "I think, all things considered, that it is just as well," she remarked. "There is no reason I should actually have possession of the Stone. What is important is to make certain that it is beyond the reach of He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named."

"We are not satisfied that your measures will suffice," said Snape.

"Obviously, we must agree to disagree," Dumbledore replied soothingly.

The two of them left soon after, determined not to share their future plans with the Headmaster.

"Perhaps it's time to confide in Pomona and Filius," said Minerva.

"Possibly. They are no happier about the presence of the Stone than we."

"And after being required to create diversions, they might like to assist in creating a real trap."

Snape paused. "However--" He came to a stop, thinking it over. He had not heard from Flamel, and did not want to raise Minerva's hopes unduly by hinting that outside help was on the way. "I think it would be unwise to mention our concerns about Quirrell. Neither of them, however accomplished, is an expert in the Dark Arts."

"All right," Minerva agreed, "but I reserve the right to consult with them if we fail to find the solutions to our current predicament."

It was time for more research. Minerva quietly retreated to her own study and the books she would not and could not share with Snape.

Snape himself was deep in his edgier references: The Book of Raziel the Angel, The Book of Baphomet, The Red Book of Carfax Abbey.

No one source had all the answers, but he was finding ideas here and there. A circle of copper wire and sea salt inlaid into the floor in front of the mirror would assist in keeping anyone looking into the mirror from attempting to move away. A mildly hallucinogenic potion could loosen the bond between a dominant spirit and its victim. That might be of some help in rescuing Quirrell, but would not expunge the shred of the Dark Lord from Harry.

The accidental horcrux in Harry, in fact, appeared to be the knottiest problem before them. Harry's youth posed a special challenge. An exorcism at this particular age would destroy his magic and could conceivably kill him. As far as Snape could see, they would simply have to wait until Harry was older and stronger, and his magic was more developed and stable.

In the interim, they would attempt to divide Quirinius Quirrell from his fellow traveler. And they would attempt to make certain that the Dark Lord's look into the Mirror of Erised would last a lifetime--and beyond. Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. The crabbed handwriting of the old volume before him was straining his eyes...

He wanted to study, to read, to research, to do anything but think about his experience before the Mirror of Erised. He had always found pleasure dwelling on his memories of Lily, and now he found he did not want to think about Lily at all. His mirror vision had been too disturbing--too ugly--and, of course, too absurd. He knew perfectly well that the Philosopher's Stone could not grant new life to the long-dead. Even the most exaggerated, unreliable sources never claimed that. It was a bizarre fantasy, bordering on necrophilia. The phantom of the Mirror did not behave in any way like the real Lily he had known. It was all a painful jumble, and he would read this book and not--

"Severus?"

He looked up from the book, expecting Minerva in the fire. It was, instead, Charity Burbage, smiling at him, as she so often did these days.

"Was there something you wanted?" he asked, not entirely politely.

She smiled again, apparently dismissing his tone as normal for him. "May I come through?"

"If you must."

Charity seemed to feel that they had somehow "bonded." Ever since she had come to Hogwarts last year, she had tried to make friends with him. They were, after all, quite close in age. Charity had been a Hufflepuff two years ahead of him, and a prefect--a fair one. He recalled her intervening in a very disagreeable encounter with Potter & Company outside the Charms classroom. She had otherwise not made much of an impression on him during his school years. She was much podgier in his hazy memories, and with as unfortunate a complexion as his own had been in those days.

He doubted he had made much of an impression on her, either. With no classes in common and coming from different houses, there was little reason for them to interact. Her siblings were much younger than he, and he had not known them at all. She had informed him since her return that her brother had been three years behind him, and in Ravenclaw, and her little sister had just completed her first year in Hufflepuff when the whole family decamped to New Zealand immediately after Charity had finished school. There was yet another brother, he understood, who never attended Hogwarts at all. Only Charity had returned to the mother country, and he suspected she was a little lonely and at loose ends without her family within easy reach.

Hence the attempt at making friends, he supposed. She seemed to have taken his involving her in Harry's club as an invitation to renew her efforts. He wondered if she expected to be offered refreshments. She was certainly dressed very nicely and smelled of high-quality Castile soap and a scent distilled from lime flowers, lemongrass, and--yes--a touch of plumeria. He wondered where she obtained the

perfume. Plumeria was notoriously difficult to distill without destroying the delicacy of the fragrance. It was fresh, unfamiliar, and--not unpleasant.

More smiles. He gestured vaguely at a chair, and she seated herself at once, her scent wafting over with her movements.

"I hope Harry has told you how awfully well the club is going!"

"I have received that information from him. And from you, too--every day--in the staff room."

She laughed. "Yes. I have been going on about it, haven't I? I'm so excited about it. Last year was rather difficult, you see, with that ridiculous book and feeling my way. This club though--it's given me such hope and purpose. One of these days, the Governors will allow me to replace the textbook, and I'm preparing for it."

"You've found something better?"

She beamed. "I'm going to write it myself!"

He raised an inquiring brow, and let her prattle happily.

"Those wonderful children have given me no end of good ideas," she told him. "I still have to make certain they can pass their O.W.L.s and their N.E.W.T.s, so I'll have to go over the very wrong-headed and peculiar way the test questions are phrased, but considering how easy the actual material is, I'll have lots of time to teach them real things that young people actually want to know: food and fun and how to get about--and clothes and fashions and holidays. And I can sneak in a bit of politics and science along with it. I'm already sketching out a syllabus."

"In your copious spare time? I salute you."

"Thanks! But you know, my course load is nothing like yours, Severus. I don't know how you manage, really. I only have a section each of third through seventh years, and I've whole half-days to myself. I'm so glad about the club. Last year I hardly felt I was earning my pay!"

"How nice for you. I certainly earn mine."

"Oh--I know!" she sympathised. "It must be such a burden. And your duties as Head of House, too! You'd think that the Headmaster would hire additional staff for the core subjects so that you could concentrate on the gifted students in the later years."

Snape somewhat rearranged his opinion of the woman opposite him. His teaching schedule was extremely demanding--perhaps overly so. It was very perceptive of Charity to notice that. The stress of avoiding accidents, day in, day out, took its toll. No other teacher at Hogwarts faced the difficulties that Snape himself did. It was part of the reason that his standards for his N.E.W.T. classes were so extremely high. If more students were to be permitted admission to them, he would have to break the sixth and seventh years into two sections each, which his schedule would not permit; or he would have insanely large classes in which he would teach potions of the greatest delicacy--and danger.

"Yes--well, you know Albus," he remarked carelessly. "The eternal optimist. His experience teaching Transfiguration doesn't really give him much understanding of my situation."

"Well, I think it's awful," she replied candidly. "And if anything went wrong, you'd be held responsible. Perhaps if you had an apprentice, he could take over some the duties and teach the younger students."

"I've considered it, but I would have to train an apprentice, and that would take time as well."

"I hadn't thought of that. And of course, the parents might not like it if their children didn't have the best to start them out right."

Snape was much struck by her insight. She was, he acknowledged, an intelligent woman. Her book on adapting to the wizarding world was very well done. That she found the current text wanting was only proof of her good sense. And she was nice to Harry--very nice, in fact.

"I've made some wine lately--something of a hobby of mine," he said, abruptly changing the subject. "Would you care to sample some? Nettle or blackberry."

"Oh--what fun! Yes, I'd love to. Blackberry, please."

Snape owned a very nice set of cordial glasses: blue-stemmed, and rimmed and flourished with gold leaf. A tiny emerald was set into the side of each one to ward against poisoning. He was proud of the set, since it was nearly the only heirloom he had left from his mother's family. His grandmother had paid the occasional visit--when she could slip away from his grandfather--and would bring money and gifts, which had included this set of glasses. Snape barely remembered her, as she had died when he was five or six, but he cherished his precious copy of Beedle the Bard and his gobstones as relics of her forgiveness and goodwill. When she died, things at home had rapidly taken a turn for the worse.

He was pleased with Charity--very pleased with her generous and sensible remarks--and opened the cupboard that held these special glasses. The blackberry wine looked good in them, glowing richly purple against the gold designs.

She admired the colour, too, he saw. She sipped her drink carefully--thoughtfully--he was pleased to note. She did not gulp it like a savage swilling beer. She hummed with pleasure.

"This is marvelous."

He set down with his own glass and broached a subject that had occasionally crossed his mind.

"Your hair."

She looked up, nonplussed, one hand reaching up anxiously. "My hair? Is something wrong with it?"

"No--I mean--all those braids. They're very interesting. Do they have some sort of arithmantic significance?"

"Well," she said, blushing, "actually..."

Harry found that drawing an ellipse was far more difficult than drawing a circle.

In the Explorers' room, behind a decorative screen, he was doing his best to reproduce a drawing in the manuscript Professor McGonagall had given him to copy last summer. Finn's Window he had mastered. He had also learned about the other two Wonders of Finn the Enchanter. Professor McGonagall had told him that education was never wasted. His little copy was proving its worth now.

An ellipse was an oval, with two foci instead of one focus. With two pegs, a string, and a piece of chalk, Harry eventually managed to construct a very creditable Finn's Eye. In the centre of the five concentric ellipses, a triangle held a figure of three connected characters. The Ogham letter that indicated "birch" also was the sign for sight. He added the flourishes, the little rhombus to the left, and then tapped it three times, whispering "Nusquam occultus est, Finn!"

He turned slowly, three times widdershins, and then tapped it again, saying the same words.

Three more turns, another incantation, and the spell was done.

He held his breath.

A trembling pause, a curious hissing noise, and then a little round hole, where the pupil of the eye would be, drilled its way through the wall. A thin beam of blue light sparked dancing motes of dust and shone a white circle on the screen hiding Harry from the rest of the Explorers' Room. Looking through the hole, he found he could see the entire hall clearly, far better than he could have with a simple peephole drilled into the wall.

Professor McGonagall might approve of his interest in independent study, but he doubted she would approve of his purpose, which was to spy on the staircase leading to the third floor corridor.

Slinking out of the door, he grinned at the sight of the pristine corridor wall. Just as the manuscript promised, the Eye was invisible from the other side.

He couldn't possibly be here all the time--nor had Professor McGonagall given permission to share these family spells with anyone else. He had already done too much that might put his new friends in danger. The greatest problem was to get away by himself. His friends were so very friendly, after all. They actually liked spending time with him! The solution had come to him last night.

"Muffy!" he called softly.

The little female elf was before him, pale eyes huge and worshipful.

"What can Muffy do for Little Master Harry?"

"Muffy! Im Harry--just Harry! Just like before school started!"

The eyes, blinked, once, twice. Harry sighed, knowing that "Just Harry" was a concept that caused Muffy extreme discomfort. What was not beyond her, however, was the favor he next asked.

"Muffy will help Little Master Harry," the house elf responded eagerly to his request. "Muffy's friends will help, too."

"I really appreciate it, Muffy," Harry replied. "There's no way I could do this myself. I need to know if Professor Quirrell tries to go up those stairs there. Don't let anyone see you, You'll be safe here in the Explorers' Room. Just step behind this screen and look out the little eye I drew in the wall. No one will notice you that way."

His conscience pricked him a little, and he added, "But if you see a student going up there, find a way to distract them. Make them turn back. They could get hurt up there."

More students came to the next Explorers' meeting. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass. Anthony Goldstein and Michael Corner.

Professor Burbage arrived and greeted Harry, full of good humor, her hair more elaborate than ever. Harry noted that some of the girls admired her hair, and were copying her today, after a fashion. Susan's long plait had become very complicated, and Hannah's pigtails each seemed to be composed of half a dozen smaller braids. He saw several of the girls touching their hair and asking questions, and heard them talking about Arithmancy in whispers. He shook his head, unable to see any connection.

Neville was patrolling the room, and said, "Malfoy's late. His friends, too."

"I wonder what--"

Just then, the door swung open, and Draco swaggered in, bearing a shepherd's crook with all the dignity of an old-fashioned wizard's staff.

"Witches, wizards, and worthy explorers!" he proclaimed, "I give you-- Ovina, the purest ewe of the Greater Spellcombe breed!"

Behind him, on either side of a snow-white sheep of impressive size, were Crabbe and Goyle, grinning proudly. Crabbe had the animal on a lead of pale-blue satin. A pale-blue bow jauntily decorated her tail. The boys guided her up to the front of the room, and all the girls squealed. Ovina blinked, but stood placidly, accepting their admiration as her due.

"--Oh, the darling thing!"

"She's gorgeous, Draco--"

"What a sweet face--"

"You said sheep smell bad, Malfoy, but she's perfectly clean--"

The boys were won over when Ovina persistently attempted to chew on the back of Draco's robes. His furtive attempts to shoo her away were somehow missed by Crabbe and Goyle until half the room was roaring with laughter.

"Well--yes--" Draco remarked, glaring, trying to put the best face on it. "She's a Malfoy sheep. She knows quality when she sees it."

"--or tastes it," Pansy teased.

Draco made a face. "Well, come on, then," he said, motioning to her. "Touch her wool. It's nice, really."

Pansy pushed ahead of the rest of the girls, much to the annoyance of some, and stroked the curly wool of the ewe's head. "She's soft."

"Best wool in the world!" Crabbe affirmed stoutly.

Hermione came up on the other side. "I've never touched a sheep. Do they bite?"

"Do they bite?" asked Goyle with scorn. A pause. "Well--sometimes--"

Pansy backed away hastily.

Crabbe reassured her, grinning. "Naw--this one never bites. Right lady, she is. Come on."

Hermione came forward, stroked the wool, and then boldly plunged her fingers into it. "She is soft."

Harry wanted to try it himself, but held off until the girls had their chance. Neville attempted to herd the girls into a semblance of a queue. Susan and Hannah took their turn, giggling, and then Lavender and Parvati.

"Oooh! She smells like lavender!" Lavender was excited and flattered. She pulled her hands from the wool and said, "And my hands! They're soft, too! Here! Parvati! Feel them!"

All the girls started crowding then. Neville was brushed aside. The rest of the boys rolled their eyes and waited. Professor Burbage came up, wanting to touch the ewe herself, but a little worried.

"Is she--house-trained?" she asked Crabbe in a whisper.

"Don't you worry, Professor," that young lad assured her loudly. "She won't be leaving a present on the floor! My Dad bespelled all the shit out of her when they cleaned her up!"

Some of the girls--and a few boys--dissolved into embarrassed titters at his blunt language. Charity decided not to rebuke him. The word was appropriate-- in context--sort of--

"You can do that?" Terry Boot, asked, very interested.

"It's easy," Goyle declared, he wand already out. "Copro--"

"Perhaps not now," Charity interposed. She whispered to Goyle. "Someone might use it for a prank, you know."

Crabbe and Goyle gravely assured her that such an idea had never crossed their minds.

All, in all, the well-groomed and lavender-scented Greater Spellcombe ewe was a big hit.

"Lanolin," Hermione said, after some thought. "That's what makes our hands soft. It's the lanolin in her wool."

"What's lanolin?" Hannah asked, puzzled.

"The chemical in sheeps' wool that makes it soft. In the muggle world it's used for hand cream and--"

Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other in dawning comprehension.

"Reckon she means woolwax." Crabbe decided, ignoring Hermione's indignant face. "Greater Spellcombe wool is dripping with it. Slimy stuff it is."

"Oh! Woolwax!" Pansy said, understanding. "Of course! Everybody knows about woolwax. That's the proper name in our world," she said, with a disparaging glance at Hermione.

Charity was on the alert, and was not going to allow one of the muggleborn to be made to feel bad. She said, "That's just the sort of thing I hoped you all would learn here! Now--Daphne, is it? Can you name a common potion that uses woolwax?"

"Er--ah--Sleekeasy?"

All the girls nodded sagely. Draco and quite a few of the boys nodded as well.

"Very good," encouraged Charity. "Tell everyone what Sleekeasy is, please."

"It's a potion for your hair. My mother uses gallons of it. It makes it smooth and shiny."

"It sounds just the thing for Granger," snarked Pansy.

"Excuse us a moment," smiled Charity. She stalked over and took Pansy by the elbow. "Come with me." she said in a tone that brooked no defiance. They walked away, out the door. They were not gone long.

Draco said to Hermione, "Don't mind Pansy. That's just how she is. If she can get a dig in anywhere, she will."

Charity was quickly back with a chastened Pansy.

"Sorry, Granger. I didn't mean anything by it. I use Sleekeasy myself."

Charity decided to fade into the background once more. Harry and the rest of the boys now took the opportunity to admire the sheep themselves. As further entertainment, Crabbe revealed an unexpected talent: he could perform the standard shearing charm

with ease and considerable precision. The club members watched, fascinated, while he sheared a neat pattern on Ovina's left flank

"W-W-E!" Harry read. "That's brilliant!"

A round of applause.

Ovina's patience seemed to falter a bit. Crabbe said, "Reckon it's time she was home."

More applause, as the ewe was paraded out the door by Crabbe. Draco told Harry, "Dobby, our house elf, will take her back--"

"Are we ever going to dance?" Lavender was loudly wondering. There was a rising tide of interest and conversation.

"Dancing," Harry groaned.

"This is fun, Harry!" Neville insisted, pulling him to the centre of the room. "I never got to dance with other kids before. It's much nicer than dancing with Gran and Uncle Algy!"

"There is that," Harry agreed in a mutter, not willing to imagine dancing with either or both of those individuals. It was nearly as unthinkable as dancing with Aunt Petunia--or Uncle Vernon.

A laugh burst out of him, but everyone was laughing and talking and nobody noticed. Feeling much better about dancing with fellow students, Harry allowed himself to enjoy the talk that ensued about the Shepherd's Dance: how it was danced for lambing time and shearing time; how the crook was to be decorated with ribbons, and with wool or flowers, depending on the rite; the proper apparel and proper location for the dance to have genuine power.

First Lavender, and then the balance of the girls pleaded with Charity to show everyone what the clothes looked like. Charity sighed, and transfigured Lavender's robes into the garb of a Lady of the Meadow: a snowy shift with long bell sleeves, a primrose petticoat, and a sleeveless woolen gown the colour of spring leaves. Her sensible

schoolgirl shoes became dark green dancing slippers, and a wreath of wild roses crowned her head.

"All right," Charity said, "And now, which of you lads will be The Guardian of the Flock?"

Draco was ready to put himself forward, but Harry caught him discreetly by the arm. "Just for today, Draco," he whispered, as Charity gestured a beaming, red-faced Crabbe out of the crowd.

"Oh, very well," Draco muttered. "I suppose it means a lot to him. Mind you, I look better in the clothes than he does!"

Harry had no doubt that Draco would certainly look more glamorous, but Crabbe looked right in the tall boots and knee breeches, in the embroidered saffron-coloured shepherd's smock. His wreath was of glossy oak leaves, and they lent the hulking boy a certain nobility. He took up the shepherd's crook and "made a leg" to Lavender in the most old-fashioned wizarding way of bowing. A duplicating charm gave all the boys and girls their own crooks.

"They'll only last an hour," Charity warned them, "and if I see any horseplay with them, that will be the end of the dancing!"

A tune surged through the air, a pulsing rhythm, a hint of melancholy. Crabbe led the boys, and Lavender the girls, and they ceremoniously clashed their crooks together and advanced and retreated, and then formed a long line, bringing the ends of the crooks down with a thump on the beat. A kick to the side, another resounding thump, and Harry was beginning to believe that after all, proper magical dancing was rather fun.

Especially when there was a sumptuous tea to follow.

Note: My friend JOdel, who has given me a great deal of help with this story, reminded me that braiding and knots (whether hair or cords or what-have-you) is part of a magical discipline called ligature. Sometimes it is used to summon winds, but I like to think it could be used for other purposes.

Many of you want to know what Minerva saw in the Mirror of Erised. I like it remaining mysterious, and up to the readers' imagination. However--Dumbledore may get a clue, by the fact that Minerva wanted to use the Stone, that she is not the happiest of witches. Here are some possible scenarios: she wants to de-age herself and live her life over, not spend decades futilely crushing on a gay man who never regarded her as anything other than a good student and good friend; she may want to deage herself and use a time-turner to settle Tom Riddle's hash back in their school days. She may want to extend her life and become Headmistress and change all the things about the school that have bugged her for years. She may want to enjoy her youth and beauty (and Maggie Smith was a very beautiful woman when young) and marry and have a family. Choose the scenario or combination thereof that you prefer!

Chapter 32

When he had been the unhappy and neglected boy in the cupboard of the house in Privet Drive, Harry had experienced how miserably slowly time could pass. At Hogwarts, the experience was quite the opposite.

The weeks seemed to pass in a whirl of activity and excitement: study, lessons, club meetings, the visits with friends from other houses, the visits down to Hagrid's hut, his Saturday afternoons with Professor Snape. There was so much to do and to know. His continuing concern about the Stone, and Muffy's reports of Professor Quirrell's movements were a secret, absorbing adventure. It seemed incredible that Halloween was almost upon them.

He was doing very well in his classes--among the best in his year. Professor Snape seemed pleased with him, though of course, he always had advice about how to do even better. Professor McGonagall gave him her small smile of satisfaction in the course of nearly every class. Transfiguration, especially, was hard, but he felt like he had grasped the concept. Professor Snape said the world was divided into those who "got it," and those who never would. Harry's essays were not the best in the class, of course: Hermione's were longer, Draco's more polished, Terry Boot's more philosophical. However, his magical talent made up in practical lessons what he sometimes lacked in pure theory. At least his handwriting was legible, and he knew how to organise his ideas. Without his lessons last summer, and his regular Wednesday study sessions, Harry was certain that his work would have been mediocre at best.

He always thought more clearly after he had a bit of breakfast in him. Hogwarts food was unfailingly, reliably wonderful. He was dawdling over an extra piece of buttered toast one Saturday morning, when Susan's owl swooped in, a large, shapeless paper package in her talons.

"My costume!" Sally cried. "Thanks, Pallas! Thank you, Susan! My dance will be ever so much nicer now!"

"Let's go see it right away!" Hannah said, very excited. In a bustle of crumbs and nearly-spilled pumpkin juice, the three first-year girls vanished from the table. The boys all rolled their eyes in mutual sympathy.

"Witches," sighed Ernie, with an air of great worldly wisdom.

Harry scowled at his harmless toast. Talent Night was this next Friday, and Harry wished he had some wonderful accomplishment to exhibit. Sally would uphold the honour of the firsties. She was going to dance something called "The Dying Swan," with two upperclassmen playing the music on lute and cello. He looked up the table. Ernie's cousin Primula and her sixth year friends were going to model dress robes they had devised themselves. Cedric and his friend Periander Summers were laughing, and quoting bits of dialogue from a famous French wizarding comedy Periander had translated.

Summers told them, "It's called 'Hélas, j'ai transfiguré mes pieds.'"

Harry obviously looked very blank. Cedric grinned, and said, "It's about a transfiguration disaster. We call it 'Oh, No! Not the Feet!'"

The table laughed, Harry along with them. He still wished he had something he could do. He couldn't sing, couldn't play an instrument, couldn't dance (except in the club with everyone else), didn't know any clever French plays.

Justin was thinking along the same lines. "I wish we could do something."

Eloise Midgen leaned over the girl next to her, and said, "People do all sorts of things. Lysandra Warbeck is going to show off her embroidery, and Hector and Troilus Doge are going to show the photographs they took of muggles last summer."

"That's--odd," Justin remarked.

"We must be able to do something!" Harry growled.

"Well--you're getting to be really good at flying, Harry, " Ernie suggested. "Maybe you could bring a broom and zoom across the stage." He laughed when Harry threw his crusts at him.

"Cedric and that lot are doing a bit of a play," Justin considered. "Are there any stories we could act out? I mean--like wizarding stories."

A thoughtful silence.

"I've got my copy of Beedle the Bard in my trunk," Harry told them. "We could take a look, anyway."

On the way to their dorm, Ernie suddenly said, "I am not going to do Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump!"

Justin made a face. "Too right," he muttered. "Whatever that is."

Ernie's kneazle Widdershins mewled out a greeting, glad to see them back. Harry dug through his trunk and found the book Professor Snape had given him.

"I read it once, but I don't remember all the stories." He paged through. "The Fountain of Fair Fortune, The Wizard and the Hopping Pot, Babbitty--sorry Ernie--The Tale of the Three Brothers--"

"That's it!" Ernie declared. "We can do that one! There are three of us!"

"I can't memorise a lot of lines on short notice," Justin warned him.

"We don't have to! We can ask one of the girls to read the story, and we'll act it out--except we need somebody to be Death and somebody to be the second brother's sweetheart."

But, all in all, it did not seem hopeless. The three of them read though the story (it was very short) and could see how it might be done.

"We need a cloak," Harry pointed out. "And I suppose we could put a sheet over whoever was Death. Maybe somebody could help us with that."

"We can do this," Justin agreed, very pleased. "Might I borrow this book, Harry? I don't know these stories."

"Fine. But be sure to give it back. It was a present from Professor Snape."

They waited for the girls in the Common Room. After some time, Susan and Hannah came down, giggling and chattering.

Susan said, "Sally's doing her exercises. Her costume is gorgeous!"

Hannah sighed.

Taking that as his cue, Harry said, "We were working out a plan to do something ourselves for Talent Night. You could join in, if you like."

Instantly he had their complete attention. The boys burst out with their ideas. Both girls knew the story, and thought it was the hand of Fate that there were three Hufflepuff boys in their year.

Ernie said, "One of you can play Death, and one of you can be the dead sweetheart. We'll have to find someone to read the story."

Hannah considered. "Or one of us could play Death and the dead sweetheart. Death can wear a mask. The sweetheart just stands there. And the one who doesn't act can read the story bits."

The girls withdrew to confer and were back in less than two minutes.

"I'd rather read," Susan said. "Hannah thinks it would be fun to play Death. We'll need a cloak and a mask and something for Death to wear that Hannah can cover her robes with. We'll have to write it out so you can each say something as one of the brothers."

Ernie contributed, "I can ask my cousin Primula to help us make costumes. Somebody in the House might have a mask, or one of the sixth or seventh years could transfigure something."

It took very little time to throw their little skit together. A hooded black cloak and a loose black robe with huge sleeves were not too hard to find. Try as hard as they might, however, they could not find a mask or anyone who knew how to transfigure one. Hannah thought that a white scarf tied tightly over her face would look spooky enough. Cedric told them there was a spell to make a mist that would fill the little stage at the end of the Common Room.

"And we can pop a grey beard on you easy as easy for the last bit, Harry," Cedric told. "People do it as a prank all the time."

Sally came down, and was disappointed to find herself left out of the playlet.

"But you have your own dance, all by yourself!" Susan said. "That's much grander! You'll be the best thing about Talent Night!"

"I want to help, all the same," Sally pouted.

In the end, they decided that Sally could be the one who killed the eldest brother and took his wand. All she had to do was put her arm through the curtain, pretend to cut Ernie's throat, and then grab the wand. On her first try, she grabbed Ernie by the nose instead, amidst endless giggling. Hannah came out as Death, to gloat over the body, and kept breaking up as she attempted to spread out her arms in a menacing, billowing way.

"You look like Professor Snape!" Justin called out.

"Here, now!" Harry protested, grinning himself.

And it was worse when Hannah was pretending to be the dead sweetheart. When Justin called out, "Oh, ring of power, show me my dead sweetheart!" she strode out, pigtails bobbing, stared at Justin, and they both burst out laughing.

"Oh, stop!" Susan said indignantly. "This is serious! Hannah, you're supposed to be dead and suffering!"

"I can't--stop--" Hannah puffed, pink with mirth. "Justin--stop looking at me--"

Annoyed, Susan said, "And how are you going to get back into your Death costume fast enough?"

"Maybe Primula can do a charm," Ernie suggested.

Susan frowned. "Sally, isn't your dance about dying? Why don't you show us your dance and put Hannah in the mood?"

"I don't want to show you until I have my costume on, and I need my music," Sally said, shaking her head.

Not knowing Amelia Bones, Harry had no idea how much Susan resembled her redoubtable aunt at the moment. She immediately tracked down Merton Graves, and dragged him back to the firsties' rehearsal, telling him they had an emergency and needed Sally's music.

"Herman's in Arithmancy just now," he objected.

"You'll be enough," Susan declared. "We really need to see something serious right away. We can draw the curtain so it's just us. Sally, please, please fetch your dancing robes and your special shoes. Maybe then everybody won't be so silly. I don't want to look stupid in front of the entire House! What if Professor Dumbledore comes? He does, sometimes, you know!"

So Sally ran up to get the precious package, while Susan and Harry and a still-giggling Hannah acted out the third part of the story. The idea of wearing a long white beard made Harry smirk.

"Don't grin like that, Harry!" Susan ordered. "You're giving up the Cloak of Invisibility to your posterity!"

"His posterior?" Justin gibed.

Susan threw the book down. She shouted, "You're impossible! I don't want to do this if you won't do it right!"

They were attracting a lot of attention. Luckily Sally arrived, and the curtain was drawn to let her change into her costume without being seen. After a few minutes, she told them she was ready, and they clambered through the curtain and sat down cross-legged to watch.

Harry stared at Sally. She was beautiful. She had a wreath of silk flowers on her head, and was wearing a white dress like a princess, with the puffiest skirt in the world. It was not full-length, but just past her knees, and the bottom of the skirt was artfully frayed, making it look even more ethereal. She had strange white slippers tied with satin ribbons.

"Whoa, Sally!" Ernie breathed in admiration.

She looked embarrassed. "It's not the right costume for the Dying Swan," she admitted. "It's just my leotard and my tutu from my last recital. We danced the Panorama from Sleeping Beauty. But I know the Dying Swan, and my teacher isn't here to tell me I'm too young to dance it."

"I love it," Hannah said. "I wish I had robes with a skirt like that. Let's see the dance!"

"Merton, you can start now," Sally called through the curtain. She scowled at her fellow first years. "If you laugh, I shall never speak any of you again as long as I live."

The haunting cello melody began, and Sally rose up on her toes and drifted toward them, already quite another being. From the first measures, laughing was the last thing on their minds.

It was not long, and it was not the greatest performance of the dance, but the children did not know that. To Harry, it seemed beyond belief that anyone could do that. Sally must have some sort of special magical ability. The swan struggled against her impending doom, and settled slowly into a pose on the floor, her arms stretched out in front of her and her head slightly to the side. The last trembling notes died away.

"That was--"

"--Amazing!"

"Thank you, Merton!" Sally called, bounding up from the floor.

Harry just stared. Before he could utter his own compliments, Susan broke in excitedly.

"Sally--I know! Why don't you play the dead sweetheart and do your dance then? It would fit right in! The sweetheart doesn't say anything, and that way as soon as the second brother kills himself, Hannah can come right out as Death and gloat over the both of you!"

"That's perfect!" Hannah said. "I could never play the sweetheart as well as you, Sally! I'll be Death, and you be the sweetheart. Ernie, maybe your cousin Primula could cast a color charm and make Sally grey all over like a ghost!"

"I really like those white robes," Ernie said reluctantly.

"Grey would be better for a ghost," Sally agreed, "as long as it's not permanent." She thought a bit, "It's really more like dancing Giselle, but I don't know any of the variations from that. I'll change what I do with my arms a bit to seem more like a spirit and less like a bird!"

After that excitement, the last details were put in order. Merton and Herman were prevailed upon to play additional music for the skit, mostly the old wizarding ballad "The Three Brothers" to help set the mood.

For the death of the first brother, Sally would not want to scramble on the floor in what Ernie and Susan persisted on calling her "dancing robes." Instead, Harry would provide the mysterious arm of the new Master of the Elder Wand.

Professor Sprout was in and out of the Common Room, and felt that Talent Night was shaping up well. Quite a few of her badgers were

performing, and perhaps, given the precedent, even more of them would be encouraged to participate in the next such event in the spring. To her delight, she discovered that all the firsties were performing together in a special presentation of the Tale of the Three Brothers.

The dress rehearsal surpassed all her hopes. As she did every year, she sent the non-participants to their dormitories, and summoned each performer or group of performers individually. So much talent! So many gifted children! What good taste Morwenna Robbins and Primula Macmillan had! How well the Llewellyn brothers sang! Who would have thought that the Diggory boy could be so clever and funny?

And all her firsties! They were a prime lot this year. Of course, she said that every year, but this year was special--and not just because of the Potter lad. They were all doing very well--all nice children. They got on well together, and they had started that splendid club! They would really deserve some special recognition at the end of the year. They bustled in, holding piles of costumes, and Primula Macmillan, Merton Graves, and Herman Wintringham were with them. The two boys brought their instruments.

"Music, too!" Sprout exclaimed. "I know I'll enjoy this!"

She did, too. And she was very impressed. Yes, they were young and mostly amateurish, but it was really a clever way to tell the story. And the little Perks girl! Sprout had not taken much notice of her, other than to see that she was pretty. A middling student, but quiet and well behaved. To have such an unusual talent! She had really thought for a moment that the children had persuaded a ghost to participate. She noted Primula's backstage work with the charms. That deserved points, both for the skill shown and the kindness to the young ones. The musicians, too, would be rewarded. Such lovely music. She must tell the Headmaster. He was very fond of music himself. He had almost promised to attend the Hufflepuff Talent Night. This might sway him.

The Headmaster's throne-like seat was placed front and centre before the small gold-draped stage. In a comfortable chair, Pomona Sprout sat beside him. It had been a struggle, but she had kept the firsties' little play a secret. The Headmaster would be so surprised and pleased to see these six children from such different backgrounds, working together to tell that fine old tale.

She had not put them first in the program, but halfway through. She would start with some of the solo performances. They performed just in front of the gold curtain, so the skits could be set up behind them. Everyone loved a laugh, so Cedric and Periander's dialogue would be at the end, and any damage to the stage caused by the roughhousing and zany prank jinxing would not spoil things for anyone else.

It was going quite well, other than a third year suddenly being afflicted with stage fright. She was soothed and persuaded to start her flute solo again, and finished with credit. The Headmaster was clearly pleased, twinkling throughout and applauding with enthusiasm. Their own House ghost, Friar Roger, was beaming and clapping, up in his comfortable aerie near the ceiling.

At last it was time for the firsties. Susan Bones, her red hair twisted into an intricate fishtail plait, her robes immaculate, stepped onto the side of the stage, and announced in a clear voice, "The First Years of Hufflepuff House wish to present our rendition of The Tale of the Three Brothers, by Beedle the Bard."

The lights in the Common Room dimmed. Beside her, Sprout heard the Headmaster shift in his great chair. Glancing to the side, she saw the twinkle replaced with a look of surprise and deep thought. He leaned forward, as if not wishing to miss a word. Lute and cello combined played the well-known ballad softly.

"There were once three brothers," read Susan, "who were traveling along a lonely, winding road at twilight."

The assigned prefect spelled the curtain open, and revealed Justin Finch-Fletchley, Ernie Macmillan, and Harry Potter, all in their student robes and Hufflepuff ties, strolling out of the wings. A thick mist rose, creating a mysterious scene.

"Look! A river!" cried Ernie in a deep, manly voice. There were faint snickers from the audience.

"Indeed!" loudly agreed Justin. "It appears too deep to cross!"

"Whatever shall we do?" wondered Harry. "Wait--I know!--one, two, three--"

The boys shouted as one, pointing their wands.

"Pontus!"

In a shower of turquoise sparks, a little footbridge appeared centre stage.

Applause, and some wondering chatter at the success of the firsties' advanced spell. The spell was actually cast by Primula behind the draperies, but that was undetectable to the audience and served its purpose, as first Ernie, then Justin, and finally Harry strutted victoriously over it, each giving the audience a wave or a thumbs-up.

Out of the mist on the other side of the stage, a figure emerged: A hooded black figure, hard to see clearly at first. The face was--white?

Dumbledore stiffened, uneasily reminded of the War. No--that was not a mask, but a veil or scarf. Still, it had looked for a moment like--

"I--am--DEATH," pronounced the figure.

Nervous giggles rippled through the audience. Hannah-as-Death spread her cloak out and confided to the audience in a stage whisper, "I shall punish their arrogance, but I shall do it with CUNNING."

She turned to the three brothers, and in a sickeningly sweet voice she said, "I congratulate you, mighty wizards. Lesser beings drown in that stream, but you have proven yourselves too powerful for me. Name whatever prize your hearts desire."

Ernie, in the deep voice of the eldest brother, demanded, "Give me the most powerful wand. I want a wand that always wins for its owner--one that is worthy of a wizard who has conquered Death!"

Death produced a stick, and said, "Take this wand of elder wood. Never shall it fail the hand of its Master."

Justin spoke next. "I want the power to recall others from the Land of the Dead. Give me a mighty charm!"

"Take this stone," said Death. "It has the power you seek."

Hannah's robes billowed as she turned to Harry. "And you, the youngest-- what would you have?"

"I--hmmm---" Harry rubbed his chin, pretending to be thinking. The audience rustled and chuckled. "Wait! I know!" said Harry. "I want something that will hide me from YOU!"

"You ask too much!" Death protested.

"You said I could name my prize!" Harry insisted, folding his arms. "I don't want you following me around. Give me what I want, or I'll tell everybody that Death is a BIG FAT LIAR!"

With a huff that sounded just like Hannah Abbot, Death pulled off its black hooded cloak and handed it to Harry, saying, "Very well. This is the Cloak of Invisibility. Don't lose it! It will hide you from any danger."

"Cool!" Harry said, admiring it.

Another wave of giggles.

The curtain was shut, and Susan read on:

"In due course the brothers separated, each for his own destination. The first brother traveled on for a week or more, and reaching a distant village..."

Ernie swaggered in as Susan read the story of his unfailing success in duels.

"I have a wand that Death gave me," he announced. "It makes me invincible!" He stretched and yawned and lay down, pretending to sleep.

"That very night," read Susan, "another wizard crept upon the oldest brother and as he lay, wine-sodden, upon his bed..."

An anonymous hand, holding a dagger, emerged from the draperies in back of the stage, and in a not-very-realistic gesture, appeared to cut the throat of the sleeping brother. Nonetheless, the audience was quiet as Ernie slumped in death. The hand groped about for the wand, and then, seizing it, pulled it back out of sight.

Death emerged from the shadows and spread its arms wide over the scene.

"And so Death took the first brother for his own."

The curtain was spelled shut, as Susan continued her reading.

"Meanwhile, the second brother journeyed to his own home, where he lived alone..."

The curtain opened on a dense mist. Justin stood at stage left, the stone in his hand. He called out, "O Stone of Power! Return to me my dead sweetheart!"

Sprout noticed that Albus was fidgeting again. What was wrong? Well, the music would settle him down.

Herman and Merton began playing a slow and melancholy tune. Out of the mist appeared an unearthly figure, arms crossed on her breast like a corpse, who seemed to float across the stage. The audience murmured in admiration as Sally, grey as any ghost, performed her dance very creditably. Sprout beamed, trying to catch the Headmaster's eye, but he was totally engrossed, and seemed rather sad. As the music came to an end, Justin pretended to stab himself

(with the same fake dagger used before) and Sally sank to the floor beside him. Hannah came out, and spread her huge black sleeves wide once more.

"---And so Death took the second brother for his own," read Susan.

The curtain shut. The students' murmur grew in volume and there was some tentative applause, here and there, for Sally. It was hushed as Susan began reading again.

"But though Death searched for the third brother for many years, he was never able to find him..."

The curtain opened again and revealed Harry Potter, his back to the audience. He turned, and laughter rose, as he was revealed to have a long white beard. With the addition of long white hair and glasses, he looked a little like a small version of Albus Dumbledore himself.

He grinned at the audience and slowly removed his cloak.

"I've lived a long, long time, and now I think I'm ready to move on." He folded the cloak and laid it down on the stage in front of him. "This cloak will be an heirloom in my family, passed down from generation to generation. And now--Oh, Death, I'm WAITING!"

Death emerged from the side of the stage and said, "There you are at last! Well, if you are ready--if you are prepared--"

"I am," answered Harry firmly. "Let's go!"

The familiar melody of "The Three Brothers" was heard again, this time played with triumphant finality. Harry linked arms with Death, and they slowly walked away together, as the mist rose about them.

"And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life. The end."

The curtain closed.

A burst of applause and some cheerful catcalls. The curtain opened and all the firsties came out. Hannah was busily untying her white veil and finally yanked it off, revealing her pink and breathless face. The greying charm was removed from Sally, who looked very different in her natural dark hair and white costume. Susan motioned Primula to come out from behind the draperies, and then to the two musicians to come up and bow with them.

"Well, Albus!" Sprout gushed in pleasure. "Wasn't that delightful? And little Sally-Anne Perks and her muggle dancing! She must have exceptional talent."

Dumbledore smiled and applauded and expressed his complete agreement with Pomona's sentiments, concealing how very disturbing--in so many ways-- he had found the whole performance. To his relief, the lights in the Common Room had brightened once more. The history of his own wand--the wand in his robes this very minute! Harry Potter with the Cloak of Invisibility! That very cloak was in his office, kept for the boy, and the thought of it caused Dumbledore quite an uncomfortable pang of conscience. He had meant to give it to Harry for Christmas, but with things as they were, perhaps he should advance his schedule...

The Resurrection Stone was the one Hallow he had not succeeded in tracking down. He had longed to find it and in doing so, to find closure for the terrible events of his early life. The charming little dance had somewhat softened his distress. Music was a great healer, truly.

But to see Harry doing an impression of--well--Dumbledore himself--was alarming on a deep level. Especially a Dumbledore going off on the next great adventure so blithely. Death was nothing to fear, of course, but Dumbledore knew he had a great deal to accomplish before he could allow himself to pass on. And so, for that matter, had Harry...

Note: I enjoyed the concept of Harry catching "the conscience of the King" without even knowing it. Some of the lines were my homage to CAPSLOCK!Harry, who otherwise annoys me so much in canon. Thank you all for your continuing support and reviews. Even when I

don't agree, I find new things to think about. And when I do agree--I shamelessly adopt the ideas for my own.

The wizarding ballad "The Three Brothers," is known in our world as "The Three Ravens," and has different words. Same tune, though. It makes sense to me that the story would be known in ballad form before being written down in prose.

Chapter 33

"--but I wish you could have been there," Harry told Snape over tea. "It was such a lark! I'd always thought I'd like to be in a play, and it went really well..."

"So I was told--repeatedly--by Professor Sprout at breakfast. And she told everyone else, too. Clearly, she thought Hufflepuff Talent Night a notable success."

"Oh, yeah--yes--Cedric and Periander did this play about transfiguring feet, and it was hilarious, with lots of pranks and charms--and some of the kids played music or sang--and Ernie's cousin and her friends had a fashion show--and the girls liked that--and the Headmaster was there. It was all pretty cool. I wish you'd seen it. Sally danced, too. She's really good and wore a really pretty dress she called a tutu." Harry sighed with satisfaction at the memory and took another biscuit, munching it dreamily.

Snape gave his charge a tight smile, and indulged his chatter. Slytherin House had no event comparable to Pomona's Talent Night. Nor did any other house. Filius was very fond of music, but his one attempt many years ago had resulted in a great deal of jealousy, accusations, and bad feeling within Ravenclaw. Now he was talking about trying again. A different group of children...more experienced leadership...the good example of the Hufflepuffs...

Pomona had gone on most especially about all her first-year students cooperating so nicely on their little play. Snape secretly shuddered at what might transpire if he required his own first-years to attempt something similar. Pansy would bully the other girls--he had not missed her mean-spirited remarks at Millicent Bullstrode's expense--and Draco would assume a leading role as his due. Gregory and Vincent might permit that, but Blaise and Theodore would resist, and then there would be resentment and hexes and possibly injuries and tear-stained owl's home to indignant parents. Impossible. Completely impossible.

"--and it was really all thanks to you, Professor," Harry was saying.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You gave me my copy of Beedle the Bard! If we hadn't had that, we wouldn't have found the story that was just right for us!"

"Oh, yes. The Tale of the of Three Brothers." Snape found it interesting that Harry described performing what was really a rather dark and tragic story as a "lark."

"I wish you could have been there," Harry repeated, now more wistfully.

"Severus?" called a voice from the fire.

"Yes, Professor Burbage?" answered Snape. She had been chatting through the fire and visiting quite a bit lately. It had not proved as irritating as Snape had once thought it might be.

"Oh--is Harry with you? I'm sorry to disturb your special tea-time together, but I wonder if I could have a word with both of you."

"If you like."

Her robes were more violet than lilac today, but she smelled as nice as ever. She gave them both a smile as she stepped through the fire, patting her hair a little self-consciously.

"Would you care for some tea?" Snape asked.

"Oh--well--yes--just a sip. I won't take up too much of your time."

She was handed her cup, fixed to her liking. Snape knew by now that she took milk and one sugar. After the obligatory sip and thanks, she launched into the reason for her visit.

"I had an idea for the next club program, Harry, and I wanted to see what you thought. I know you had asked Cedric Diggory to come and talk about quidditch, but perhaps he wouldn't mind if we put that off

for later. Instead, why not have a repeat performance of his play and yours for all the first-years? We could call it an introduction to wizarding literature. I've heard so much about how well you all did. It would be nice if your classmates could see it for themselves--especially now, when it's all fresh in your memories."

Harry was willing enough. He had really enjoyed performing, and had felt let-down and a little disappointed when it was over.

Charity, Snape discovered, had given the idea quite a bit of thought. She had arranged with Pomona to borrow the little Hufflepuff stage and move it to the meeting room. If all the participants could manage to come on Sunday afternoon, there seemed nothing to hinder them.

"And you could come and see, Professor!" Harry said excitedly.

"If it would not impose--"

"Not at all!" Charity supported Harry. "I think you ought to see what the students have been doing. In fact, why not let any staff member come who likes? Talk to the others, Harry. I'm sure they won't mind."

Harry knew that all the Hufflepuffs would like to perform for as many people as possible. He was not the only one who had had a good time. He would ask the other officers, but he could not picture them objecting. Of course, they wouldn't want grownups coming to all their meetings, but this once it should be all right. He could invite Hagrid and Professor McGonagall, too! Susan and Hannah would enjoy planning special treats for the guests.

Hermione was very interested in the prospect of seeing "wizarding theatre." Neville had never seen any kind of stage performance at all, and considered it a wonderful, unlooked-for treat. Draco did not fail to point out that he had seen the complete play "in the original French" in Paris, but conceded that it would be a very nice thing for those who did not have his advantages.

"But your show--" he whispered to Harry"--with Sally dancing--" He pulled Harry away from the others, grey eyes wide. "Is it all right--really? I heard that muggle dancing was--you know--sort of depraved. Does Sally wear anything? Because if--"

Shocked, Harry gave him a push, and said, "Draco! Of course it's all right! Sally's dance was--beautiful! She wears a really pretty costume and she's not depraved! How can you say that?"

A little offended, Draco huffed, "Well, that's what I heard! I heard that there are places where muggle women dance naked!"

Neville and Hermione were listening, of course. Neville's jaw dropped at the horror of it all, but Hermione broke in, scandalised, but eager to give them the best information possible.

"Oh, Draco's right! There are such places, but they aren't nice at all. Decent people don't go there!" she explained, innocent and officious. "Sally's dancing is completely different. Ballet dancing is very refined and respectable. It's Great Art. There are all sorts of muggle dancing, but ballet is the best! I heard that Sally did wonderfully well."

"She did," Harry affirmed, scowling at Draco. "It was--beautiful. You'll see. She didn't dance naked!" His voice dropped to an embarrassed growl on the last word. "How can you think Sally would do that?"

"Well--how should I know? She's been brought up who knows how--you said yourselves that things are different in the muggle world! How would I know what they consider all right for a girl to do?" Unwilling to let go of the subject, he asked, "What exactly did she wear?"

Harry was untutored in matters of feminine fashion, but managed to more or less describe the billowing skirt and the wreath of flowers and the satin laced slippers.

"Well--" Draco conceded grudgingly. "That sounds quite acceptable. Odd, but it is a costume after all. And everyone did say it was very good. I didn't mean to say anything against Sally."

"All right, then." They continued their discussion of how Draco would call the meeting to order, since Harry would be busy getting ready behind the scenes. Cedric would come to them to talk about quidditch in the meeting after the following one, which would be the Halloween meeting. They would learn about the customs, treats, and dances of ancient Samhain, and it was sure to be popular.

Quite a few guests did come to the Explorers' meeting. Susan and Hannah looked upon it as a kind of Open House to introduce their club to the staff and distinguished visitors. The little stage was set up just so in the attractive, high-ceilinged chamber. The silver on the table against the far wall gleamed, the chandelier sparkled. Professor Burbage had found dozens of elegant gilt chairs from somewhere, and they were set up facing the stage.

Among the distinguished visitors was a representative of the Board of Governors. Lucius Malfoy and his wife Narcissa arrived, smartly dressed for an afternoon's entertainment and tea, smiling on all the little first-year students. They saw Snape lurking in the back row and greeted him as an old friend, inevitably spiriting him along with them to the seats in front.

"What a delightful room!" Narcissa said. "I don't believe I've ever been here before."

"Severus!" called Charity Burbage, busily conferring with Susan Bones, "Save me a seat!"

Snape nodded gravely, and the Malfoys exchanged discreet looks and incredulous smiles.

"Ah--Professor Burbage," Lucius remarked. "Draco owed us that she had been generous enough to sponsor the meetings. Have you been seeing a great deal of her?"

Flatly, Snape answered, "She lives here, too. I can hardly avoid her."

"What a good colour for her," Narcissa murmured to Lucius, just loud enough for Snape to hear. "She's much improved from her school days. She's quite grown into her looks. Her hair is very striking, I think. Does she always wear amethysts, Severus?"

"I hadn't noticed," Snape shrugged elaborately. "Amethysts are a good all-purpose charm."

"Mother! Father!" Draco called, coming over to see them. "I'm so glad you could make it! We're going to start soon. With Harry and Bones busy with the skit, I've had to do everything! I've instructed Granger to include in the minutes the names of everyone who attends. It should be quite an event!"

He strode away to greet Professors Flitwick and McGonagall, and to show them to their seats. Sprout was here too, since the Headmaster had told them he would be in his office if there were any emergency. Draco had no liking for the Headmaster, but it would have been polite had he made the effort to attend. Well, they would do very well without him. All the Heads of House--oh--and there was Hagrid!

Draco told Neville to show the half-giant to the special chair Professor Burbage thought would be comfortable for him. Once Hagrid was settled, Draco checked the time and swept an eye over the gratifyingly full room. They would need to begin in a few minutes, but just as well to let the late-comers come skulking in first. He felt very pleased with himself. Blaise and Theo had come and were sitting with Vince and Greg, with Pansy and Daphne on their other side. Slytherin House was showing proper solidarity today. Whether it would last was anyone's guess.

He gave his best, practiced smile to Lisa Turpin and Padma Patil. The girls joined the Gryffindor Patil and her friend. Brocklehurst and McDougal were still recalcitrant, but it was their loss, after all. Haughty little bints they were, anyhow, with precious little to be haughty about. Granger was worth ten of them put together. There she was, busily noting down the names. A good sort, really. Trying to learn and fit in. He had done wonders with her, just with a bit of advice and encouragement.

Another student made an appearance. "Hullo, Millie!" Draco greeted her, surprised. "I didn't expect you! Glad you're here all the same. The Slytherins sit over there--"

The big girl mumbled, "Hullo, Draco. I'll just sit back here, if it's all the same to you."

"Suit yourself."

It was time. He smoothed his hair and walked forward to give the formal welcome. It was very pleasant to preside today, when his parents could see him, and to be Master of Ceremonies for the programme. Maximum visibility, with a minimum of responsibility. As he was greeting everyone, carefully remarking on the presence of a school Governor, he noticed a flash of red hair sneaking into the room. Not allowing a reflexive sneer to spoil his appearance, he continued with the opening remarks. Not even a Weasley could ruin this for him.

Snape found the little performance was quite pleasant, really. The music was well done, and Harry and his Hufflepuff friends seemed to be having a jolly time. The pontus charm was interesting. He had never had occasion to use it, but the colourful sparks were a bonus--at least when being entertained. Charity, next to him, was smiling with pleasure. She smelled very nice. Even Narcissa had admired her robes and hair, and Narcissa was notoriously critical of other witches. It was rather agreeable to have a friend to sit with today.

Ah--here comes the famous dance.

Snape knew nothing of dancing or ballet or anything of the sort. Life in Spinners End was not exactly replete with high culture. He could tell, however, that the little girl was doing well at whatever it was she was supposed to be doing. The music was very nice, and the costume something that he was sure that other little girls would admire. He puzzled over the shoes. Muggles could not be using charms, so the girl must actually be moving on her toes. Surely that could not be good for her feet? Narcissa was whispering something to Lucius, who nodded, his face an unreadable mask of polite attention.

In fact, Narcissa felt rather concerned. A beautiful child--by far the prettiest of the year. Narcissa understood that nearly all of them were in attendance, and she had eyed each of them thoroughly. Some she knew and some she did not. It was clear that the little dancer was the pick of the bunch for looks. Her looks, in fact, were the sort that would only improve with puberty. That could be very inconvenient. She glanced behind to see Draco, and was irritated to see him watching with an enchanted expression. She did not want Draco looking in such a way at the bastard half-blood daughter of that eccentric Unspeakable Croaker and some muggle trollop. At least she was not one of the officers of Draco's little club. Sally-Anne Perks! What a ridiculous name! A graceful, pretty child, certainly. Narcissa wished futilely, fiercely, for a pretty daughter of her own, whom she could dress in an absurd confection of tulle, whose brow she could wreath in flowers and pearls, who--

She bit her lip, and forced her attention on the play. Oh, that's over, at last! And now--Harry--how funny--what an amusing, subtle way to mock Dumbledore...

After his own play was over, Harry found Cedric and Periander's performance even better than the last time. Maybe it was the bigger audience, and the louder laughs. Draco had saved him a seat and he edged in between the blond boy and Neville, accepting their whispered compliments with a grin. He was gratified by Draco's added remark that "Sally's dance really was quite charming. She looked very nice, too."

He suspected that the rest of the audience enjoyed Cedric's performance more than The Tale of the Three Brothers. The mock duel was hysterical, and the room rocked with laughter as Periander hopped across the stage on a whale's fluke. I really do love magic, he thought, very content.

"The Burbages are an old family," Narcissa considered later that night, as her hair received the requisite brushing. "Quite old. Quite respectable. I think she fancies Severus, dearest."

"I daresay. The pickings are slim at Hogwarts," Lucius pointed out, lounging on the bed. "Should she set her cap at Flitwick? At Hagrid? At--Dumbledore?"

Narcissa tinkled a chilly little laugh. "Don't be gruesome, my darling. I take your point that Severus is the only wizard at Hogwarts who would be even possible, but still---I think she does genuinely fancy him. That's all to the good, of course. It's a very nice thing for him to have a witch of good breeding hunting him down. Their children would be still be halfbloods, unfortunately, but if she doesn't mind, so much the worse for her. The only question is if he finds her sufficiently attractive."

"I think she's attractive enough--" Lucius observed, wisely adding, "--for Severus. I've always thought he fancied redheads, but perhaps he has branched out lately."

"High time that he did!" Narcissa said sharply. "A decent pureblooded witch like Charity Burbage should not have to resemble that muggleborn tart Lily Potter to be considered good-looking."

"Don't let Harry hear you calling his mother a tart," Lucius admonished.

Almost ashamed, Narcissa tossed the hairbrush down, and turned to him frowning. "All right! She wasn't a tart, but she was something very close to it, as far as I'm concerned!"

"I know you disliked her."

"I did--and not just for her muggle blood. I disliked her personally. So pleased with herself--so uninterested in our ways. Grabbing all the magic she could--and so quick to parrot Dumbledore, too. Such a--a--Gryffindor!"

Lucius chuckled. "And yet you seem quite fond of Harry."

"I do quite like Harry. He's been a nice companion for Draco. They've had pleasant times together. Of course, he wasn't raised by either of

his obnoxious parents. A very good thing. And I'm certainly not sorry he's under Severus' wing now. I'm not even sorry he's in Hufflepuff--much. He seems to be enjoying himself, and the children seem nice enough."

"The little dancing girl is very pretty," Lucius remarked. "Maybe the current Potter will follow the tradition of marrying the best-looking girl of his year."

"Oh, I hope not! A half-blood? The mother a muggle? Surely Harry can do better. The Bones girl is going to develop nicely, and she has a great deal of spirit and good sense. Look at how well she played the hostess today, young as she is! A pureblood, who would produce pureblooded children for the Potter line once more. Much more the thing. Or that Gryffindor Brown girl is pretty enough. She might do. Possibly Daphne Greengrass...I don't think Harry much likes Pansy Parkinson."

Lucius laughed heartily. "Draco does though--or at least he can put up with her. I hope she'll improve with age. Of course, the little Perks girl might prove a distraction. She's certainly a graceful creature. It was quite interesting to see that sort of dancing."

"Draco does not need that sort of distraction! And neither do we."

"He's only eleven, Narcissa! Let him enjoy his schooldays!"

Samhain customs involved more dancing, a bit of candlemagic--something about which Harry had previously known nothing--the significance of pumpkins in wizarding culture, and the magical uses of a bonfire. The bonfire, alas, the Headmaster forbade, for reasons of "safety." However, the Halloween feast was something to look forward to. The purebloods had been interested and amused to hear about the similarities--and differences--of muggle Halloween lore from their fellow club members.

Lately, Harry had remembered that his parents had been killed on the thirty-first of October. He wondered if that made it wrong for him to

celebrate. He remembered very little about that night, and he disliked thinking about it, anyway. On Halloween morning, he talked it over in the dorm with Ernie and Justin.

"I don't think it's disrespectful, Harry," Ernie said, after taking time to consider it thoroughly. "I mean--it's only the feast. You have to have dinner, anyway!"

"Nobody expects you to starve yourself!" Justin agreed. "That would be stupid. Besides," he added, remembering a term he had read, "You're not celebrating Halloween. You're observing it. It's showing respect for wizarding tradition. That's very important!"

Harry allowed himself to be comforted and convinced.

"Yeah," he agreed, as the delicious scent of baking pumpkin wafted through the castle. "tradition is important."

Charms class that day was great fun. Professor Flitwick decided that they were ready to learn the levitation charm. It was not at all easy, but by the end of class Harry had managed it, and was helping Sally, who was partnered with him. Hermione Granger and her partner Terry Boot had caught on to it almost immediately, and were playing with the feathers, sending them higher and higher.

Some of the Ravenclaw girls sulked, but no one said anything unpleasant to Hermione today--especially not in front of Professor Flitwick. Hermione Granger was regarded somewhat as Flitwick's "pet," and no one wanted to rouse the diminutive professor's ire again. The two other Ravenclaw boys were civil to Hermione now. Two of the girls, Lisa and Padma, were almost polite. The other two simply ignored her. Harry was pleased to notice that Hermione was ignoring them as well, and not seeming unhappy about it.

Even better was Potions, where Harry always felt particularly at ease with the subject matter. He and Draco worked well together, and their potions had been uniformly successful. Their Hand Healer Salve was going smoothly at the moment. Since their seats were so close to Professor Snape, Harry was generally able to tune out the various conversations that were whispered as they brewed.

Not today.

"Ex-cuse-me!" drawled Pansy. "Do let someone else have some dried hyssop. I realise that some people need to make a double batch to cover their gigantic man hands, but I would like to finish this assignment sometime this year."

Harry frowned and looked behind him. Draco whispered, "She's ragging on Millie again. It's been going for days now--even before Millie came to the meeting with the plays. And Pansy got an owl from her Mother this morning, and she's always impossible after getting one of those."

There was a hint of a scuffle behind him and Harry heard Sally hiss, "Stop that! Leave her alone!"

"Sorry, Perks, I didn't mean to upset your boyfriend! Though a halfblood would be just the thing for someone with her background. Or his, I meant to say. Is Bullstrode a nice boyfriend, Perks? You two seem so close--such a lovely couple..."

Her voice had risen just a little too much. Snape looked up from Crabbe and Goyle's mess of a potion to hear the last few sentences. Instantly he was looming over Pansy Parkinson, staring her down.

"You will not speak for the remainder of the class. You will stay afterward."

Knowing she had gone too far, Pansy ventured, "I have Herbology next, Professor."

"No, you don't."

He turned his back on her, and continued his restless monitoring of the class. Draco raised his brows at Harry, who whistled soundlessly. Pansy was for it. Harry would hate for Professor Snape to be angry with him.

The Halloween decorations surpassed anything Harry had yet seen. Thousands of live bats soared through the Great Hall, clinging to the walls, zooming overhead. Pumpkins glowed with the yellow light of the candles within. When the feast suddenly appeared, Harry and his friends grinned at each other in delight.

"Oooh! Brussels sprouts!" Susan called out. "My favourite!"

"Eeeww," muttered Ernie, whose mother's sprouts were invariable grey and swimmy, despite all her magic. These, he had to admit, were green and healthy-looking. He still could not be persuaded to taste them, though Harry and Justin were talked into taking a spoonful each.

Harry was on the point of popping one in his mouth, when Professor Quirrell came dashing into the hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he ran to the Head Table and gasped, "Troll--in the dungeons--thought you ought to know."

He sank to the floor in a faint.

Amidst the uproar of questions and screams, Harry and his fellow Hufflepuffs were silent, looking at each other in bewilderment. Harry had warned them that something was wrong with Professor Quirrell, but what were they to make of this?

Purple firecrackers exploded from the end of Professor Dumbledore's wand, and the noise abated. "Prefects--" he commanded, "--lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

The Hufflepuffs were bewildered. The Slytherins, at their own table, were outraged. Their Houses were in the dungeons.

"But--" Hannah protested helplessly, "--if the troll is in the dungeons, why is the Headmaster sending us there?"

Further up the table, the Hufflepuff prefects were in hot debate. The seventh year male prefect, Bryn Llewellyn, shook his head at the

others, saying, "If we stick together, we should be all right. We can deal with the troll if we come across it."

Primula Macmillan hissed furiously, "The Headmaster never thinks of Hufflepuff. Never!"

Llewellyn shrugged in resignation. "We'll keep the kids in the middle. Come on, then." More loudly, he called out, "Follow me! Stick together and stay with us prefects! If we stay together we've nothing to fear!"

Harry glanced up at the Head Table. Professor McGonagall was talking very excitedly to the Headmaster, her face angry and disapproving. Professor Snape--was gone. Harry caught a glimpse of black robes vanishing through a door behind the table. With a jolt of fear, he looked back at Quirrell. The faint had not lasted long. The turbaned professor was already up, slinking away, head down and saying nothing to anyone. He was making for the great doors.

This is it! Harry thought in panic. He'll go after the Stone while everyone is distracted!

He squeezed into the line of Hufflepuffs hurrying to the exit. Quirrell was out the door and around a corner. The students, slower and confused, jammed together as all four tables reached the doors at the same time. Prefects called to their charges. Some of the professors were coming to help. Harry took advantage of the pandemonium to slip under Llewellyn's arm, glad for once that he was small. He pushed through the thronging students, trying to get out and see where Quirrell was going.

"Harry, wait!" Draco saw his friend hurrying through the crowd, a set, determined look on his face. At first Draco meant to call Harry over and walk part of the way to the dungeons with him. In an instant, though, he understood the reason for Harry's rush.

It's Quirrell! It was all a trick!

"Time to go!" he muttered, shoving Blaise and Daphne out of his way. An argument was breaking out between the Slytherin and Ravenclaw

prefects. Draco clung to the walls, and was away before anyone could notice him, hard on Harry's heels. He heard footsteps ahead--light running steps.

In the Great Hall, Minerva McGonagall, thinking at once of Harry, had persuaded the Headmaster that sending half the children in the direction of the troll was not a sound plan.

The Headmaster sent out more sparks, and declared, "On further thought, it would be best if you all remained in the Hall and finished this splendid feast. Return to your seats at once. Prefects--see that no one leaves until I return. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout, with me. The rest of you, remain with the students."

With that, he led the Heads of Houses out the little door through which Snape had previously exited. The confusion, already great, was even worse now. Some students had left the Hall and had to be recalled. A milling mass was at the doors, some pushing to get in, and some (who had not heard the Headmaster's words) still pushing to leave. With considerable effort, the students were herded back to their tables.

Hermione had noticed that Quirrell was no longer on the floor. Where had he gone? It was a disgrace that the Defense Professor had come panicked and fainting into the Great Hall, unable to deal with a troll.

Except--

It took her only a moment to come to the logical conclusion.

Quirrell did it deliberately--as a diversion!

She searched the room for Harry--and then for Draco--and then was relieved to see Neville at the Gryffindor table. But where were the other two boys?

"Oh, Harry! You didn't!"

Harry found his observation post deserted. He immediately called for Muffy, and rounded on her.

"Muffy! Where have you been?"

"Master Harry! We watches for Professor Purple Hat, just like you tells us. But we only watches when he comes near this room. House elves has their own ways of knowing where professors is."

Harry thumped the wall in exasperation. "You haven't seen him?"

"No, Master Harry. He is not been coming this way."

"All right then. I'm sorry I yelled at you. You go on back now, and I'll watch here for awhile."

The house elf appeared about to object, and then winced with pain at the thought of such defiance and popped away.

In a moment, Draco came pounding down the corridor.

"Harry!" he whispered loudly.

"Around here!" Harry whispered back.

Draco hurried into the club room, and in a moment stepped behind the decorative screen.

"There you are! Any sign of Quirrell?"

"Not yet. He might double back, though."

"What's this?" Draco asked, his finger tracing the tiny circle of the Eye.

"Finn's Eye. It's a thing I learned. You can't see it from outside, but you can see what's going on all the way along the corridor."

Draco tried it, and was impressed. "That's brilliant! How do you cast it?"

"Well..." Harry knew Professor McGonagall would not like him blabbing about her personal Family Magic. "--It's complicated. Listen, Draco! I think Quirrell might be going after the Stone tonight, while everyone's distracted. If we see him, we'll need to get word to one of the Professors, but I don't know where Professor Snape went. He ran out the back door as soon as Quirrell came in."

Draco nodded sagely. "He probably went to guard it right away. He said there were protections. If Quirrell comes, we should let him go by. He's bound to run into Professor Snape, and then he'll be sorry. When we see him, we should run back to the Hall and find--somebody..."

"Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick, I reckon. We could tell the Headmaster, but I've never spoken to him."

Scoffing at the idea, Draco said, "I have. He'd probably ignore us. Flitwick is all right. I suppose McGonagall is, too. She's certainly a competent witch. Even Father thinks so."

"Yes, she is," Harry agreed, peering anxiously through the Eye. "You'd be amazed at the things she knows."

Snape entered Fluffy's lair very warily, looking in to see if the trapdoor had been disturbed. No one appeared to have entered tonight, other than himself.

The Cerberus roused itself and glared at Snape, its chains rattling. Instead of glaring back, Snape whistled a formless, aimless tune to keep the monster pacified. A rumble indicated that Fluffy was not certain that Snape's efforts qualified as music. With a sneer, Snape ducked back out of the chamber, closing the heavy door behind him. He would wait in the shadows of the corridor.

"Everyone's a critic," he snarled.

With growing anxiety, Hermione watched the tables to see if Harry or Draco had returned. The other students had settled back and were digging into the food, talking and speculating all the while.

The other Hufflepuff first-years were gathered at their places, but were not eating very heartily. Hermione saw their heads together, as they held a whispered conference. Cedric Diggory was leaning over, asking them a question, a frown on his handsome face. Susan Bones shook her head, and Cedric's frown deepened.

Hermione glanced at the Slytherin table. Draco had not returned, and there was talk there, too. Why weren't they doing anything? What if something happened to Harry and Draco? Would they try to confront Professor Quirrell all on their own? What if they stumbled on the troll? What if they stumbled on the troll and Professor Quirrell at the same time?

It was impossible to remain seated. Hermione jumped up, ignoring the hisses and complaints of the other Ravenclaw girls, and looked for someone to help her. A grown-up. A teacher.

Oh, thank goodness! Just the person!

Time passed, and Harry and Draco grew bored. They were hungry, too, having missed the feast entirely.

"I don't think he's coming," Draco declared. "I think he was just having us on. Maybe he wanted to see what Dumbledore would do in an emergency."

Harry was inclined to wait a little longer, but admitted that Draco was probably right. If Quirrell hadn't come by now, he likely wouldn't come at all. Or perhaps--Harry hated the very thought--he had found a different way to the Stone. That was a very distressing idea. He considered another possibility.

"Maybe Professor Snape has already caught him. Maybe he's taken him to the Headmaster's Office and Quirrell's already locked up."

Draco liked that idea. "And everyone's having their dinner now, except us. Come on, Harry, let's go back to the Great Hall. Maybe those gluttons have left something."

The two boys left the room and headed back down the hall. Harry felt a little disappointed. It would have been so glorious to have captured Quirrell in the act. Still, it would be nearly as good if Professor Snape had done it and got all the credit. He wondered if the Professor would get some sort of prize. He was about to ask Draco what sort of awards someone could get for heroic deeds in the wizarding world, when the light changed down the hall. He glanced up.

"Wait," he said, putting out his hand to clutch at Draco's robes.

A thud. Heavy, shuffling footsteps. The sound of something dragged along a stone floor. A darker shadow amidst all the others. With a trickle of dread, Harry shrank against the wall, pulling Draco with him. Draco nearly objected, when he saw the look on Harry's face.

They had passed a statue of John Dee, Sorcerer Royal, not ten paces back. The two boys slid behind it, trying to be silent and invisible. Harry thought of the Invisibility Cloak of his play and wished with all his might that he had one of his own. Beside him, Draco's breathing was quick and shallow.

A monstrous shape took form as the shuffling grew closer. In the dim light, the creature looked grey all over; and a stench, faint at first, became almost a revolting, corporeal thing. The troll grunted with every breath as it stumped along on legs like tree trunks. Its tiny head perched grotesquely on the huge, misshapen body.

Harry stared at it in horror. It had to be at least twelve feet tall. The scraping sound he had heard was the sound of an enormous wooden club dragging on the stone floor whilst clenched in a mighty fist. Harry wanted to look at Draco, in hopes that the other boy would have a confident expression on his face, but he was afraid to turn his head lest he make a noise and attract the smallest iota of attention.

The troll paused, wagged its long ears, and then continued down the corridor. Harry's mouth was dry, and he licked his lips. It was moving away--it had its back to them.

And then it paused again. And sniffed. And then sniffed again--long and deep. Another pause.

With a "Whuff!" of indignation, the troll swung its massive bulk to stare in their direction. Its squinting eyes narrowed at the sight of the marble statue, and the club was raised and then was coming down--down--

"Run!" Harry shouted.

"Run!" Draco screamed.

The club crashed down, and the air was full of marble splinters. Draco was hit by a ricochet and stumbled into Harry. The boys fell together, knees and elbows bruising, and the troll paused, studying the small, shrill-voiced creatures scrabbling along the floor.

Deciding that they looked tasty enough, the troll took a heavy step in their direction. Harry scuttled back crab-wise, fumbling for his wand. Draco clutched at his knee, moaning. Watching the troll advancing, one thudding step, then another, Harry tried to think of a spell--any spell--to stop it. His mind had gone blank.

"Incendio!" he bellowed. The troll's club blazed up like a torch. Draco rolled over on his back, trying to get up. The boys thought Harry's spell might help, until the troll stared at the burning club, and with an approving grunt, decided that it liked it. It advanced on them again.

"Good one, Harry!" Draco gritted out. "Now he can cook us before he eats us!" He thrust out his own wand, and gabbled out, "Tarantallegra!"

This did slow down the troll, who began a ponderous sort of dance: "Thump-ump! Thump-ump!" Another double step, this time in their direction. "Thump-ump! Thump-ump!"

Harry swore at his robes. He yanked on Draco, trying to help him up. "--If it doesn't stamp us to mince first!"

The troll bared its brown teeth, moving a little faster. In desperation, Harry yelled out the spell he had learned that very day. "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The flaming club flew out of the troll's hand and hovered over its head. With a grunt of outrage, the troll reached up to grab at it.

Draco gasped out, "Wingardium Leviosa," and the club edged up, just a little higher.

Distracted, the troll snatched again and again, roaring its fury. The boys worked together to keep the club away from the troll, and the troll attempted a pathetic, thundering attempt at a hop to get at it.

"This is fun!" Harry laughed.

A mistake. Not even a troll likes being teased. It lost interest in the club, and glared its tormentors, head down, ready to charge.

"I think--maybe--" said Harry, grabbing onto Draco, "--that we should--"

"Harry! Draco! Get behind me!"

Charity Burbage rushed past them, gleaming in her feast robes and jewels. "Stupefy!" she shouted at the troll.

A red light shot out of her wand, hitting the troll in the chest. The creature paused, surprised and bewildered, its jaw slack.

"Get back to the Great Hall!" she ordered the boys. "Go!"

"We can't just leave you here!" Harry protested.

The levitation spell dissipated, and the fiery club crashed to the floor behind the troll in a shower of sparks.

"Go!" she yelled at them in exasperation. The troll was moving again. "Stupefy," she screamed, her voice cracking, putting every ounce of power she had into the hex. She ground her teeth in vexation. She had been told often enough that she was useless at Defense. She had barely scraped an O.W.L. in it.

The troll stopped moving, and stood there, puzzled.

Snape heard the noise as he was coming down the staircase after his fruitless wait for Quirrell. He broke into a run.

What is going on?

He was halfway down as he saw a mass of fire fall to the floor of the corridor. In the lurid light he could make out that blasted troll, and just beyond a young woman battling the creature. Harry was behind her, his voice high and childlike, his eyes wide.

It was a shocking, horrifying sight. The woman's hair glowed red and had fallen in tendrils about her face. One arm was out, sheltering Harry. For a moment, it seemed--

"Sectumsemptra!" he roared. "Diffindo! Reducto!"

Chapter 34

"My word, Severus!" Dumbledore remonstrated. "Did you absolutely have to kill it?"

"Yes, I did," Snape answered curtly.

The troll had toppled over, bloodied and half-dismembered, just as Dumbledore rushed to the rescue. Minerva blew out a breath of relief at the sight of Harry unharmed, but gave the boy a sharp look, all the same. Snape was prepared to do rather more than that. Flitwick was still down the hall, and Pomona behind him, puffing with effort. Albus and Minerva spoke quietly to each other, glancing at the dead troll.

Charity, at least, seemed unharmed. Snape sneaked another look at her. The firelight had dimmed, and she was herself now: dark blonde hair, round cheeks, and wearing a color he had never seen on Lily. The resemblance had been strong, but brief. Charity Burbage was not at all like Lily Evans; though, as Lily might well have done, she was fussing over those two undeserving young dunderheads.

"If your friend Hermione hadn't told me you were missing, who knows what might have happened?"

Harry was embarrassed, and wisely held his peace, but Draco was full of excuses.

"I think we did rather well, actually. We disarmed the creature, and with a bit of luck we could have outrun it, and anyway nothing happened--"

"Mr Malfoy," Snape said, with terrible calm, "keep digging. The hole you are about to find yourself in will just get deeper."

Draco turned red. He and Harry looked at each other, wondering what to say.

"Professor--," Harry began uncertainly. "We weren't trying to show off. We were worried--about---you know," he muttered in a low voice,

looking uneasily at Charity and Minerva, and with even greater unease at the beaming Headmaster. "We just wanted to help."

Snape exploded. "You could have been killed, and a bloody stupid way to die it would have been! Your mother gave her life for you ten years ago on this very night. So good of you to display how cheaply you value it!"

Harry hung his head, but Snape sensed a kind of resistance there, too. It was all he could do not to give the idiot boy a clout over the ear. Charity came to his side and touched his arm. It helped him restrain himself--just barely.

Sprout arrived, and exclaimed in some horror over the bloody remains of the troll. "My goodness! Professor Snape! You certainly don't use half-measures!" She turned to Harry, not unkindly, and said, "I'm very sorry to see you out wandering, Mr Potter! I thought you were a sensible lad. What were you and Mr Malfoy thinking?"

"I was in a hurry to get to the Common Room, Professor, and I got separated from the rest. Draco and I were going to go to the dungeons together, and then we heard the troll and ran this way."

Snape considered the boy's story a fairly good lie. There had been confusion. The troll had come this way--perhaps following their scent. Pomona, to her credit, did not appear to believe a word of it.

"Well, whatever you planned, Mr Potter, you were very foolish to run ahead by yourself. You know you're supposed to stick close to your prefects and your friends. I'm sorry, but we'll have to do something to help you remember never to be so careless again."

Snape spoke up, "I was going to give Mr Malfoy detention tomorrow morning with Mr Filch. Perhaps some manual labour might be beneficial for Mr Potter as well. They both of them need to learn to do as they are told." He glared at each boy in turn, hoping that his words penetrated those thick skulls.

"Very sound thinking, Professor Snape," Pomona approved. "After all, poor Mr Filch will have to work very hard to clean up this horrid mess. The boys need to understand that actions have consequences!"

Draco and Harry looked at the blood and soot smearing the walls, floor--even the ceiling, and then looked at each other in dismay. Detention with Filch!

"My concept of punishment, however, does not include starvation," Snape said coldly. "I suggest you return to the Great Hall and see if any dinner is left."

Miserable that Professor Snape was angry with him, Harry wondered if this would be the end of their Saturday afternoon tea-times that he liked so much. He was both relieved and concerned by the Professor's next words:

"And I'll see you tomorrow afternoon, Mr Potter, when we can thrash out this latest misadventure of yours at greater length!"

"Just go, gentlemen," Minerva said, shoos the boys away.

Walking past Professor Flitwick, Harry whispered, "We used the levitation charm on the club, Professor!"

"--and it worked!" Draco added, still impressed with himself.

Flitwick's face was grave, but he gave the boys a nod, and pat on the shoulder to Draco, who was closer. Professor Sprout hustled the boys back to the Great Hall, while the others fell to discussing this extraordinary event.

"Really! Trolls in the corridors! First-years thinking themselves ready to do battle against them!" Sprout muttered as the doors to the Great Hall swung open to admit them. "What is Hogwarts coming to?"

"Detention," groaned Draco to Harry. "I can't believe we're being punished for saving the whole school! And we'll have to scrub like--like--muggles!"

Harry grunted noncommittally, guessing that Draco was unaccustomed to punishments of any kind. Harry was not looking forward to detention either. He was certainly familiar with cleaning up all manner of disgusting things from his days from the Dursleys, but he had hoped those days were behind him. He knew that Professor Snape wanted to protect him, but Harry's motives were good. Other people might not understand, but Professor Snape knew the situation with the stone, and should appreciate Harry doing his bit to help. Feeling very misunderstood and put-upon, he slouched into the Great Hall.

The noise rose at the sight of their disheveled state.

"--Did you see the troll?"

"--What happened?"

"--Where are the professors?"

"Harry!" called Cedric. "Are you all right, mate?"

Harry gave the Hufflepuffs a wry grin and a thumbs-up.

Draco was not so modest. His downcast shuffle opened out to a swagger, and he declared, "We saw it. We fought it. We lived to tell the tale."

More noise and speculation. Harry thought credit should be given where it was due, as he slid into his place at the table.

"We were holding it off when Professor Burbage came to help. And then Professor Snape arrived and he--killed it."

"Killed it?" gasped Justin, wide-eyed.

"Are you sure?" asked Hannah.

"Pretty sure."

His plate of food was still warm and looked very inviting. Susan had cut a generous piece of treacle tart for him as well. He dug in, waving at his housemates to wait until he had a few bites in him, before he told them the whole story. At the Slytherin table, Draco was gesticulating vividly, spinning a tale of derring-do. His friends listened in amazement.

Most of those in the Great Hall, however, were in agreement that Harry Potter must be due most of the credit. Awestruck gossip swelled the noise. Covert glances and outright stares of admiration focused on the dark-haired boy obliviously gnawing on a turkey leg.

"--he's so brave," murmured Lavender Brown.

"--and so modest," sighed Parvati Patil.

Hermione slipped away from the Ravenclaws and sat down by him briefly.

"Harry! I was so worried! I'm so glad Professor Burbage found you! You could have been killed, you know!"

"Yeah, I suppose. It was pretty big, and it smelled worse than anything you can imagine! Professor Snape took care of it quick smart, though. He was--impressive." Seeing that Hermione was still angry with him, he soothed her with, "--and Draco and I have detention. Professor Snape was really put out with us."

"And so he should be!" Hermione affirmed briskly. She got up to go hound Draco as well, but added, "I'm just so glad you weren't hurt!"

The older Hufflepuffs wanted every detail of what Professor Snape had done to defeat the creature. Harry, in between savoury bites, found some pleasure in giving them the blow-by-blow.

"Detention?" asked Susan. "No points lost?"

"They didn't say anything about points," Harry shrugged.

"Well! That's all right then," Susan decided, serving Harry another slice of tart.

Rather than leaving the troll for the appalled Filch to manage on his own, the Professors kindly disposed of the remains. Dumbledore was not happy that any creature should lose its life, but could hardly blame Snape for defending students.

"But the fact that a troll was loose in Hogwarts in the first place--" Minerva began hotly.

"--is a matter for discussion tomorrow, I think," said Dumbledore. "For now, let us rejoin our friends and students in the Great Hall."

Filius Flitwick, Minerva noted, was unhappy and unsatisfied at the Headmaster's blithe speech. She must persuade Severus to bring both Filius and Pomona into their private councils. The troll, while dangerous, was not the most dangerous thing in Hogwarts at the present time.

Snape stood irresolute, staring at the patterns the blood had spattered onto the wall. If he went back into the Great Hall, the sight of Harry happily eating, smugly sure of his own invincibility, might goad him into saying or doing something that could never be taken back.

Luckily, Charity came to his rescue. "If you don't object, Headmaster, I could do with a bit of quiet." She told them, a bit embarrassed, "I really don't feel like facing any questions at the moment. If you wouldn't mind seeing me to my quarters, Severus, we could have some sandwiches there. What do you say?" she asked Snape.

"What?" he responded, rather rudely, not sure what had been said to him.

"I said," she repeated patiently. "supper in my quarters. What do you say?"

Albus was beaming at him, which made him feel very contrary, but Minerva and Filius were industriously in conversation about the troll, their faces averted. Snape gave the Headmaster his haughtiest sneer, and turned away. "That would be very--agreeable."

Charity led the way down the corridor, and Snape had an uneasy feeling he was being watched. He glanced behind him at his three colleagues, but Minerva had called Albus' attention to the state of the damaged statue, and if they had been staring at him, they had looked away before he could catch them at it.

"--and some Irish coffee, too, " Charity was saying. "I make a rather good Irish coffee."

"What? Yes, very nice." His other colleagues vanished as they turned a corner. He cleared his throat. "I was quite alarmed for you."

With a weak laugh, she confessed, "I was quite alarmed for myself! I was a perfect fool in Defense. I'm no good at dueling at all." Her laugh warmed a little, "Had I but known the troll was involved, I would have brought reinforcements!"

They were climbing the stairs toward her rooms. More lightly, she said, "The boys did rather well confusing the troll, when all's said and done. I only slowed it down, but perhaps the boys could have made their escape if they hadn't been so gallant and protective. Harry refused to run away and leave me! That's worth something, Severus!"

"Is it worth their hare-brained lives? Young dunderheads. Harry was behaving just like his wretched father James Potter. There's a man who fancied himself invincible, and you know what came of that!"

He was silent, not trusting the discretion of the portraits they passed until they were safely past the door to Charity's quarters. Immediately on entering, he burst out: "I daresay it will come as no surprise to you that I hate any to see Harry displaying any resemblance to that idiot."

"I do remember what a tiresome tease James Potter was, but he was Harry's father, Severus. James is bound to make an appearance in Harry now and then."

"And I intend to see that that happens as rarely as possible. I don't want Harry getting the idea that rules don't apply to him."

He stalked over to her fireplace and brooded there, while Charity summoned an elf and gave it quick instructions. In only a few moments, the elf had returned, and a small table was set for two. A plate of sandwiches, a tureen of steaming soup, and a carafe of wine appeared.

"Come on," Charity urged him away from the fire. "You'll feel better after you eat. And so will I."

He grumbled, more out of habit than for any other reason. He threw himself into the place she indicated, scowling at the table. Partan bree? The creamy crab soup was a favourite of his. Actually he was quite hungry, he found, as he tore into a sandwich. Charity served him a bowl of the soup, and for a time he thought of nothing but the good and comforting food before him.

After he had finished the soup, two sandwiches, and a glass of wine, Charity asked him, "Harry lives with his muggle relatives, doesn't he? He doesn't seem spoiled to me, but you would know better than I. Don't they set proper boundaries for him?"

"They--" He paused and made a decision. "I must have your word that you will divulge nothing of what I am about to tell you."

"You have it."

"Harry's relatives are--a fairly repulsive lot. They hate magic and treated him badly until I intervened last summer. I think," he said, considering the matter carefully, "that it is not so much a matter of no boundaries being set, as of setting capricious and unreasonable ones. Harry has little experience trusting the adults in his life. If a thing needs doing, his impulse is to do it himself, and not to expect help from anyone. I am working on teaching him to respect his elders, but

with staff members like Quirrell--Binns, too, I suppose--it's an uphill battle."

"I see." She sipped her wine and sat thinking. "It would be very important, then, to remain calm, and to always be the adult, whatever he gets up to. If you want him to respect his elders, you have to present him elders worthy of respect. It's too late, at his age, for him to take it all on faith. Not like Hermione Granger! I should never have known that Harry and Draco were missing had she not come running to tell me. Exactly the opposite situation: she trusts adults more than her peers--or herself, I think."

Snape grunted assent, enjoying the pudding that appeared for afters. This was all very pleasant, he decided. Charity's rooms were attractively decorated. He might ask her, in future, about the exotic artifacts spaced among the books on her shelves. Very comfortable--not excessively feminine. Not as spare as Minerva's quarters, but pleasant in their own way.

After the meal was taken away, she set about brewing coffee to which she added a generous dollop of Irish whiskey. Snape was pleased that the chair provided him by the fire was proportioned adequately for a man of his height.

"I think you you'll like it," she murmured, passing him the heavy stemmed goblet. He took it, and their hands touched briefly.

A shock, of sorts. Snape stiffened, and the liquid sloshed threateningly.

"Sorry," Charity apologised, settling back opposite him with her own drink.

Snape eyed her warily, feeling uncommonly alert and on edge. The flicker of--something--reminded him of the time he had touched that secret book of Minerva's. Not so unpleasant, of course--but there was something there.

Unaccountably nervous, he concentrated on his coffee, and drank it without words. Perhaps it was time to make his farewells. Charity must be tired after such a night...

He set the glass aside, and stood.

"I must go. I have a great deal--"

"Must you? I'm sorry. I'd hoped we could have a nice long chat..."

"Perhaps another night," he countered, feeling very peculiar. "The hour is late."

She did not argue with him, but stood herself, stepping in between him and the fire. To his surprise and alarm, she put her hands on his shoulders.

"I haven't thanked you properly for coming to my rescue," she said. "I really was rather frightened, and you were very impressive."

A rustle of silk and a scent of lime flowers. She stood on tiptoe and pressed a kiss lightly on his cheek. Snape stared at her, wondering what had come over her to do something so extraordinary. He had not noticed the colour of her eyes before. They were a light, warm brown, and they were looking very frankly into his. Snape did not need to actively use legilimancy to see what had crossed her mind.

Another kiss, this time on the lips: brief, soft. Another long and meaningful look.

"My hero."

Had the world just changed? Snape considered what to do. He considered what he ought to do, what he wanted to do, and what he ought to want to do. Charity's expression was already changing: uncertain, abashed, preparing to make a joke of it all, thinking of how to give him an escape route and a way for her to save face.

"Hardly," he answered. Deciding that serious thought could go hang, he pulled her to him, and gave her a brief, rough kiss in return.

Clearing his throat, he called for his quarters and plunged into the flames without a backward look.

And so missed her little victory dance.

The wizard in the purple turban limped furiously down the stairs, cursing the monster in the third-floor chamber. All his plans had blown up in his face like a misbrewed potion. All his patient waiting in the stuffy closet while the troll snuffled after those two infernal boys--all the anxious minutes while the old fool and his minions dithered back and forth. It had all been for naught.

No--not entirely. At least he knew the path to his prize was guarded by a Cerberus. He had never come across one before, and had not expected it to be so resistant to magic. He hissed in pain. Blood was running down his leg, pooling in his boot. He needed to get back to his quarters and deal with the wound where no one would see.

A Cerberus! Where had the old fool found one? No need to wonder--it was that oaf Hagrid, no doubt. Ironical that his earlier use of the buffoon had resulted in Hagrid's permanent residence at Hogwarts, and thus his unwitting interference in his own plans. No matter--he would have his revenge on him. On the lot of them.

On the Malfoy boy, certainly. The fanged serpent of his own family's coat of arms had the right of it. "Nemo me impune lacessit," He whispered, lingering over the sibilants. No one harms me with impunity. A fitting motto. The boy would pay, as would that slippery devil his father. Nor would he forget the traitor Snape, who now fawned over his greatest enemy, that wretched little brat, Harry Potter. Every one of them would pay.

"Hurry, you fool!" he snarled, hating this damaged vessel, ignoring the protests and excuses from the voice of his servant--a weak voice, growing ever weaker. No matter. He would have better lodgings before long--and lodgings more permanent than some in the castle would like.

Harry's eyes squeezed open reluctantly to the first light of morning. Professor Snape was angry with him. He had detention this morning with Mr Filch. The world was a dark and terrible place.

Accepting that he had to face the day, he pushed the covers aside. With a whisper, a soft package slid off the foot of the bed to the floor. Harry peered over his blankets, puzzled, and reached out for the parcel. It was very light.

A present? Who would give me a present--especially after last night?

Justin was snoring faintly, and Ernie was completely under the covers--even his head. Harry quietly pulled the wrappings away, and found something fluid and silvery-grey that slithered through his hands almost like water. He unfolded it, and found that it was a piece of cloth--and much larger than he had thought at first. He jumped out of bed, and kept unfolding it, layer after layer of a fabric lighter than any silk he had imagined.

It fastened--it had a clasp. A cloak? He rushed to the little mirror by the door, ready to admire himself.

His body was missing.

Astonished, Harry gaped at the sight. A disembodied head stared back him, green eyes wide. He pulled the cloak over his head. The cloth was so light that he could see through it fairly easily, but no reflection gazed back.

A piece of parchment lay on the floor. Harry snatched it up, hoping to unravel this mystery. The note said:

Your father left this is my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you.

Use it well.

There was no signature. Harry felt very strange. Who had sent the cloak? Had it really once belonged to his father?

At once all sorts of impossibilities became possible. Harry pulled the cloak around him, thinking of what he might do--all the things he could do--things that Professor Snape need never know or worry about.

"Brilliant!" he whispered. "Absolutely brilliant!"

Note: My thanks to JOdel, for her continuing advice and beta skills. If I ever finish this monster, she is considering an illustrated version for her Red Hen site. If you have not seen her other work, you should.

Thanks also to SlytherinDragoon, another faithful friend, who keeps me at it!

The motto and coat of arms of the Gaunts is stolen from Poe's Cask of Amontillado. I can see Tom Riddle behaving exactly like Montresor.

No--Charity has not bespelled Snape. The jolt he feels is the (for him) unfamiliar feeling of mutual attraction. To paraphrase Dumbledore: A magic beyond all they learn at Hogwarts!

I hope my glimpse of Quirrelmort has answered the questions I received about what he was doing in the last chapter!

CHP035

